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The UNWILLING VESTAL

A TALE OF ROME UNDER THE CÆSARS

EDWARD LUCAS WHITE

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THE UNWILLING VESTAL

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THE UNWILLING VESTAL

A TALE OF ROME UNDER THE CÆSARS

BY

EDWARD LUCAS WHITE

AUTHOR OF "EL SUPREMO"

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
681 FIFTH AVENUE

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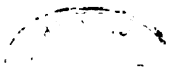

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PREFACE

The title of this romance is likely to prejudice any reader against it. There exists a popular delusion that fiction with a classical setting is bound to be dull and lumbering, that it is impossible for it to possess that quality of bravura slangily denominated "punch." Anybody will be disabused of that notion upon reading this story.

On the other hand, after having read it, almost any one will be likely to imagine that a novel with so startling a heroine and with incidents so bizarre cannot possibly be based on any sound and genuine knowledge of its background; that the author has conjured out of his fantasy not only his plot and chief characters, but also their world; that he has created out and out not merely his Vestal, but his Vestals, their circumstances and the life which they are represented as leading; that he has manufactured his local color to suit as he went along.

Nothing could be further from the actuality. The details of rule and ritual, of dress and duties, of privileges and punishments are set forth in accordance with a full first-hand and intimate acquaintance with all available evidence touching the Vestals; including all known inscriptions relating to them, every passage in Roman or Greek literature in any way concerning them, the inferences drawn from all existing or recorded sculptures and coins which add to our knowledge of them, and every treatise written since the revival of

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learning in Europe in which the Vestals are discussed. The story contains no preposterous anachronisms or fatuous absurdities. Throughout, it either embodies the known facts or is invented in conformity with the known facts.

Any one to whom chapter twenty-one seems incredible should consult an adequate encyclopedia article or an authoritative treatise on physics and read up on the surface tension of liquids.

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BOOK I

THE RAGE OF DISAPPOINTMENT

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THE UNWILLING VESTAL

CHAPTER I

PRECOCITY

"BRINNARIA!" he said severely, "you will marry any man I designate."

"I never shall marry any man," she retorted positively, "except the man I want to marry."

She gazed unflinchingly into her father's imperious eyes, wide-set on either side of a formidable Roman nose. His return gaze was less incensed than puzzled. All his life he had been habituated to subserviency, had never met opposition, and to find it from his youngest daughter, and she a mere child, amazed him. As she faced him she appeared both resolute and tremulous. He looked her up and down from the bright blue velvety leather of her little shoes on which the gilt sole-edges and gilt laces glittered to the red flower in her brown hair. Inside her clinging red robe the soft outlines of her young shape swelled plump and healthy, yet altogether she seemed to him but a fragile creature. Resistance from her was incredible. Perhaps this was one more of her countless whims. While he considered her meditatively he did not move his mighty arms or legs; the broad crimson stripe down his tunic rose and

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fell slowly above his ample paunch and vaster chest as his breath came evenly; on his short bull neck his great bullet head was as moveless as if he had been one of the painted statues that lined the walls all about. As the two regarded each other they could hear the faint splash of the fountain in the tank midway of the courtyard.

Her father, a true Roman to his marrow, with all a Roman's arbitrary instincts, reverted to the direct attack.

"You will marry Pulfennius Calvaster," he commanded.

"I will not!" she declared.

He temporized.

"Why not?" he queried.

The obstinacy faded from Brinnaria's handsome, regular face. She looked merely reflective.

"In the first place," she said, "because I despise him and hate him worse than any young man I ever knew; I would not marry Calvaster if he were the only man left alive. In the second place, because, if all the men on earth were courting me at once, all rich and all fascinating and Caius were poor and anything and everything else that he isn't, I'd marry nobody ever except Caius. You hear me, Father. Caius Segontius Almo is the only, only man I'll ever marry. Nothing can shake my resolution, never."

She was breathing eagerly, her cheeks flushed a warm red through her olive complexion, her eyes shining till tiny specks sparkled green and yellow in the wide brown of her big irises.

Her father's jaw set.

"I've listened to you, daughter," he said. "Now you listen to me. I have no objections to Almo; I

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rather like him. I have thought of marrying you to him; if Segontius and I had not quarrelled, we might have arranged it. There is no possibility of it now. And just now, for some reason or other, Pulfennius is keen on arranging a marriage between you and Calvaster. His offers are too tempting to be rejected and the chance is too good to be missed. Our properties adjoin not only here and at Baiæ, but also at Præneste, at Grumentum and at Ceneta. With our estates so marvellously paired the marriage seems divinely ordained when one comes to think it over. Don't be a fool. Anyhow, if you insist on making trouble for yourself, it will do you no good. My mind is made up. You are to marry Calvaster."

"I won't!" Brinnaria maintained.

Her father smiled, a menacing smile.

"Perhaps not," he said, "but there will be only one alternative. Unless you agree to obey me I shall go at once to the Pontifex and offer you for a Vestal."

Every trace of apprehension vanished from Brinnaria's expression. She grinned saucily, almost impudently, at her father, and snapped her fingers in his face.

"You can't scare me that way, Daddy!" she mocked him. "I know better than that. There can be only six Vestals. You can offer, if you like, but the Emperors themselves can't take me for a Vestal while the six are alive."

The laugh muffled in her throat; she was fairly daunted. Never had she seen her father's face so dark, so threatening. Not in all her life had he so much as spoken harshly to her; she had been his pet since she had begun to remember. But now, for one twinkling,

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she feared a blow from him. She almost shrank back from him.

He did not move and he spoke softly.

"Rabulla died this morning before dawn," was all he said.

Instantly Brinnaria was fluttering with panic.

"You aren't in earnest, Daddy?" she protested. "You can't be in earnest. You're only fooling; you're only trying to frighten me. You don't really mean it; oh, please, Daddy, say you don't really mean it!"

"I really mean it," her father answered heavily. "I never meant anything more genuinely in my life. You know my influence with the Emperors and with the Pontifex of Vesta. You know that if I made the proposal they would disregard any rival petitioners, would override all unnecessary formalities, would have the matter despatched at once. Unless you obey me you will be a Vestal before sunset to-morrow."

Brinnaria was now fairly quivering with terror.

"Oh, Daddy!" she quivered, "you couldn't be so cruel. I'd rather die than have to be a Vestal. I couldn't imagine any life so terrible. Oh, Daddy, please say you are not in earnest."

He frowned.

"I swear," he said, "that I was never more in earnest. I say it solemnly, as sure as my name is Marcus Brinnarius Epulo, I'll have you made a Vestal unless you agree this moment to give up all thoughts of Almo, to obey me about marrying Calvaster, and to be properly polite to him and Pulfennius."

"Daddy!" Brinnaria cried. "Only don't have me made a Vestal and I'll do anything. I'll forget there ever was an Almo. I'll be sweet as honey to Pulfennius till he loves me better than Secunda, and I'll marry

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Calvaster; I'll marry anybody. Why, Daddy, I'd marry a boar pig rather than be a Vestal."

Her father smiled.

"I thought my little daughter would behave properly," he soothed her, "and you are just in time. That may be your future husband and father-in-law coming now."

In fact they were in a moment ushered in. Pulfennius was a tall man, lean and loose-jointed, with straggling, greenish-gray hair; a long, uneven head, broad at the skull and narrow at the chin; puffy, white bags of flabby flesh under his eyes; irregular yellow teeth and sagging cheeks that made his face look squarish. Calvaster was a mere boy, with a leaden complexion, shifty gray eyes, thin lips, and an expression at once sly and conceited.

"You come opportunely," said their host after the greetings had been exchanged, "for you happen to find me alone with the very daughter of whom you and I were talking. This is Brinnaria."

"This!" Pulfennius exclaimed. "This the girl we were talking about? Impossible! Incredible! There must be some mistake."

"There is no mistake," his host assured him. "This is the girl we were talking about, this is Brinnaria."

The visitor regarded her, respectfully standing now, her brown eyes down-cast, the flush faded from her olive-skinned cheeks, her arms hanging limply at her sides. She was tall for a girl and while slenderly built was well muscled, a fine handsome figure in her red robe.

"This?" he exclaimed again. "Indeed. So this is Brinnaria. I am very glad to have seen her. And now having seen her, do you not think that our business

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would be better transacted by us three males together?"

"Certainly, if you prefer," Brinnarius asserted. He patted Brinnaria and kissed her.

"Run away now, little girl," he said, "and wait in the peristyle until I want you."

Brinnaria, once in the rear courtyard, instantly called:

"Guntello!"

Her call was answered by a great brute of a slave, bigger even than her father, a gigantic Goth, pink skinned, blue-eyed and yellow-haired.

"Now listen to me, Guntello," his little mistress said, "for if you make any mistake about my errand you'll get me into no end of trouble."

The Goth, manifestly devoted to her, leaned his ear close and grinned amiably. She repeated her directions twice and made him repeat them after her in his broken Latin. When she was sure that he understood, she despatched him with a whispered injunction:

"Hurry! Hurry!"

Meanwhile, in the gorgeous atrium, the fathers' conference had continued. The moment she had gone Pulfennius said:

"I do not believe in discussing misunderstandings before females; evidently there is some misunderstanding here. I want for my son a bride younger than he is, even if he has to wait two or even four years to claim her. You assured me that your daughter Brinnaria was not yet ten years of age and you show me a grown woman and tell me that she is Brinnaria. What is the explanation?"

"A very simple explanation," he was answered. "Merely that Brinnaria is unusually well grown and

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well developed for her age. I have seen other cases of early ripening in children and so must you."

"I've seen girls grown beyond their years," Pulfennius admitted, "but no case comparable to this. Why, man, that girl who has just left us would be taken for over eighteen years old by any stranger at first sight of her and no one on earth could look at her carefully and hazard the conjecture that she might possibly be under sixteen."

"Quite so," his host agreed, "and the better you know Brinnaria the more you wonder at her. She not only looks sixteen or eighteen and acts as if she were that age, but she talks as if she were that old and thinks as if she were even older, and she is actually three full months, more than three months, to be precise three months and twelve days, under ten years of age."

"Amazing!" spluttered Pulfennius, "astounding! inexplicable!"

"Don't you believe me?" Brinnarius queried sharply.

"Certainly I believe you," his guest disclaimed, "but I cannot realize that it can be true; I am bewildered; I am dazed."

"Perhaps," the other suggested, "you would realize it better if Quartilla added her assurances to mine."

"Oh," the other deprecated, "I do not require anybody's corroboration to your statement. But if her mother is at home, perhaps her presence would be as well for other reasons."

When summoned his host's wife appeared as a medium-sized woman, neither plump nor slender, with a complexion neither brown nor white, with yellow-brown hair, gray-brown eyes, and in every outline, hue, and feature as neutral and inconspicuous a creature as could be conceived of.

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"Yes," Quartilla said, "everybody is surprised at Brinnaria's growth. I was scared, when she first began to grow so fast, and had special prayers offered and sacrifices made at the temples of Youth and Health. Also I had a Babylonian seer consult the stars concerning her birth-signs. Everybody said she was born to long life, good health and great luck. But I can't fancy what ever made her grow so. She was fed like her brothers and sisters and she never seems to eat any heartier or any oftener. Till she was two and a half she was just like any other child. But she has grown more in seven years than any other child I ever knew of ever grew in fourteen and she's so old for her years too. Not but that she plays with dolls and toys and jacks; and she runs about just like any natural child of her age, in spite of her size; but she says such grown-up things and she has such a womanly mind. She understands the family accounts better than I do, is keen on economy and could oversee the providing for the entire household. She astonishes me over and over. But there is no doubt about her age. Both my sisters were with me when she was born and Nemestronia too. Ask any of the three. Or I can tell you a dozen other ladies who know just as well. Brinnaria will not be ten years old until the Ides of September."

"Wonderful! marvellous!" Pulfennius exclaimed. "Madam, you amaze me. But if this is true so much the better. I had thought my boy must wait two years or more for a wife, as I am determined that no more of my sons shall marry wives of their own age, let alone older. If your daughter is so young, she will just suit me, and since she is already grown up we shall not

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have to wait for her to grow up. We can arrange for the wedding for this month."

They chaffered a long time about the marriage settlement, Calvaster sitting silent, biting his lips, staring about him and fidgetting; Quartilla equally silent, but entirely placid, without the twitch of a muscle or any shift of gaze; the two men doing all the talking. Some of the talking was almost vehement, Pulfennius disclaiming promises which his host declared he had made. Once they came to a deadlock and then Brinnarius, his voice suddenly mild and soft, mentioned Rabulla's death and his notion of offering Brinnaria for her successor. At once Pulfennius became manageable and supple and all eagerness for the happiness of the young couple.

When it seemed that they had reached an agreement on every point Quartilla had her say.

"I think you will find Brinnaria everything you could wish as a daughter-in-law. The most uncanny thing about her precocious habits of thought is her tenacity of any resolve and her grave and earnest attitude towards all questions of duty and propriety. She takes clan traditions very seriously and is determined to comport herself according to ancestral precedents. You will have no fault to find with her respectfulness towards you and Herrania or with her behavior as a wife. She will be circumspect in her deportment towards all men and is sure to turn out an excellent housewife. She has lofty inherited standards to live up to and she is deeply devoted to them.

"This is the more to be wondered at since she is strangely undignified in many ways. I trust this will wear off as she grows up. It is only in this respect that Brinnaria has ever given me any cause for concern.

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She is more like a boy than a girl in many ways. She not only plays with boys and plays boys' games and plays them as well as boys or better, not only climbs trees when she is in the country, and rides bareback and goes fishing and swimming in any stream or pool, and ranges the woods and cannot be restrained; but also she will indulge in the wildest pranks, the most unthinkable freaks, play rough practical jokes on anybody and everybody, laugh out loud, shout and yell, gesticulate and contort herself into undignified postures and act generally in an uproarious and uncurbed fashion. She keeps up that sort of thing even in town, and is boisterous and unexpected beyond anything I ever heard of in any young girl. She is most docile in all really important things, but in respect to her jokings and shriekings and carryings-on she is really beyond my control. She is never openly disobedient, yet she is most ingenious at devising methods for avoiding obedience. Sometimes I lose patience with Brinnaria. But, when I really think it all over, there is no harm in any of it. Strangers, however, would think her a very terrible girl; she belies herself so. Any one becoming cognizant of some of her vagaries would form a very unfavorable judgment of her and most unjustly. In her heart she is anything but the wild creature she makes herself appear. Her squawks of merriment, her rude interruptions of her elders, her pert remarks, her sarcastic jokes, are all the manifestations of mere overflowing animal spirits, of warm-blooded youth and hearty health. She will tone down. She is the most startling and incalculable child I ever heard of. No one could anticipate her eccentricities. There is an originality of invention

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about her pranks which amazes me. But I am sure she will turn out all that I could wish."

"I trust so, indeed," said Pulfennius dryly. "I am grateful to you for warning me; I promise not to misjudge her because of any childish freakishness. And now it seems to me that we should make the young lady herself a party of this conference and bring the matter to a final settlement."

Brinnarius called a slave and bade him fetch Brinnaria.

Almost at once the fellow, a dark-skinned, obsequious Lydian, returned looking scared and yet on the verge of laughter. He could barely control his merriment, yet was plainly afraid to utter what he had to say. His master ordered him to speak.

"Instead of coming with me," he said, "the young lady sent a message. But I am afraid to give it to you. I am afraid of a thrashing if I give the message as she gave it to me."

"Another of her jokes," her father growled. "You shan't suffer for any of her impudence. Repeat her exact words; I'll hold you excused, Dastor."

Dastor, reassured, grinned with anticipated enjoyment and said:

"She says she is sitting down and very comfortable where she is, that she will not stand up till she feels inclined, and that if you want to see her you can come to her, for she will not come to you."

For a moment there was a tense silence.

Pulfennius spoke first.

"If this is a sample of the sort of deportment which my future daughter-in-law is expected to outgrow I might as well be shown just what this kind of behavior

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is like. Let us acquiesce and go to the little witch, if you do not object."

"I don't object at all to going," his host replied, "but I object to her behavior; I'll make her smart for it. Come, let us have it over with; I'll show you a submissive Brinnaria or I'll know the reason why."

They stood up and from the open atrium passed into a narrow passage lighted only from the two ends and so into the larger courtyard with gleaming marble columns at each end and long rows of them down each side. The tank under the open sky was much larger than that in the atrium and had two fountains in it. Pigeons cooed on the tiles of the roofs, and two or three of them strutted on the mosaic pavement among the columns.

The party, dumbfounded and stunned, stood without voice or movement, gazing at the picture before them.

The pavement was a cool grayish white in effect, for its mosaic work was all of pale neutral tints. Above it the background was all white,—white marble walls, the white marble polished pillars of the peristyle, white marble entablature above them, the general whiteness emphasized by the mere streak of red tiled roof visible against the intense blue of the sky.

The only color in the picture was to the left of the tank and close to it, where there had been set a big armchair upholstered in blue tapestry. In it sat a tall, fair-haired, curly-headed lad, with merry blue eyes. He wore a robe of pale green, the green of young onion tops. Against that green the red of Brinnaria's gown showed strident and glary, for Brinnaria was sitting on his lap. His arms were round her waist, hers about his neck. She was slowly swinging her blue-shod feet rhythmically and was kissing the lad audibly and re-

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peatedly. As her elders stood still, petrified, mute and motionless with amazement, she imprinted a loud smack on the lad's lips, laid her cheek roguishly to his and peered archly at them, saying:

"Glad to see you again, Pulfennius; what do you think of me for a daughter-in-law?"

"I do not think of you for a daughter-in-law," Pulfennius snarled furiously.

He turned angrily to Brinnarius.

"What does this mean?" he queried.

His host echoed him.

"Brinnaria!" he called, imperatively. "What does this mean?"

"Mean?" she repeated. "It means that I am making the most of Almo while I can. I love Almo; I've promised to forget him, to be a good wife to Calvaster, and of course I'm going to keep my word. From the moment I'm married to Calvaster I'll never so much as look at Almo, let alone touch him. So I'm touching him all I can while I have the chance."

She paused, kissed Almo twice, lingeringly and loudly, and looked up again.

"How's that for kissing, Calvaster?" she chirped. "Don't you wish it was you?"

"Come, son!' Pulfennius spluttered, "let us be gone! This is no place for us. We are being mocked and insulted."

"Nonsense, Pulfennius!" his host exclaimed. "Can't you see that I had no part in this, that the minx devised it all by herself expressly to thwart me? Don't let her have the satisfaction of outmanœuvering both of us. Don't let a mere prank of a child spoil all our arrangements. She'll be a good wife as she says."

"A good wife!" Pulfennius snorted. "I much doubt

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whether she can now ever be a good wife to any man. I'm sure she'll never be a wife to my son. You'd never convince me that she's fit to be my son's wife. Make her a Vestal, indeed! She a Vestal? She's much more likely to be something very different!"

"Do you mean to insinuate——" his host began.

"I mean to insinuate anything and everything appropriate to her wanton behavior," Pulfennius raged.

The two men glared at each other in a silence through which could be heard the cooing of the doves, the trickle of the two fountains, Brinnaria's low chuckle and the faint lisping sound of three distinct kisses.

"I beg your pardon!" spoke a voice behind them.

The four looked around.

"What brings you here, Segontius?" Brinnarius asked.

"One of my slaves brought me word," the intruder explained, "that my son had entered this house. I knew you had not changed your mind since you forbade him to cross your threshold, so I came here at once to disclaim any share in his intrusion and to take him home. I feared he might get into mischief."

"He has," Brinnarius replied, sententiously, "as you may see."

Brinnaria, entirely at her ease, hugged Almo rapturously and kissed him repeatedly.

"And I thought," Segontius pursued, "that you would probably smash every bone in his body if you caught him."

"I don't know why I haven't," spoke the big man reflectively.

"I know," shouted Pulfennius, "I can tell you. It is because this whole comedy has been rehearsed between you just to make me ridiculous. I know your way,

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your malignity, your tenacity of a grudge, your pretence of reconciliation, your ingenuity, your well-laid traps. I'll be revenged for this yet!"

"You won't live to be revenged," Brinnarius told him, "unless you get out of here quick. I'll break every bone in your body, for certain, if you address another word to me."

"Come, son," said Pulfennius, and shambled away.

"And now," spoke Segontius, "don't you think, Marcus, that you and I had best forget our quarrels and be friends again? These young folks were plainly meant for each other by all the gods who favor lovers. Let us not stand in the way."

"Indeed, Lucius," spoke the big man, holding out his huge hand. "I am of the same mind. But both of them deserve some punishment for their presumption. They should wait four years at least before they marry. My girl is too young."

"I agree," said Segontius, "and I'll send my boy to Falerii for the present. That will keep them apart and ensure propriety of behavior."

"That is well," growled Brinnarius, "and I'll send my girl to her aunt Septima's."

Brinnaria sprang up.

"Aunt Septima's?" she cried. "Spinach and mallows and a tiny roast lark for dinner every day. I'll starve to death. And prim! I'd almost as lief be a Vestal!"

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CHAPTER II

SIEVES

TO her luxurious but austerely managed villa, Aunt Septima welcomed Brinnaria with heartfelt, if repressed affection. Until the second sunrise Brinnaria controlled herself. Then the good lady endured her overgrown niece for some strenuous days, suffered impatiently for a few more, but finally packed off to Rome "that unspeakable child." At home again Brinnaria demanded pork and cabbage.

"My insides are as empty as the sky," she wailed. "Asparagus is all very well, but it's none too filling, even if you can eat all you want, and aunty says ten stalks is enough for any one meal. Chicken-breast is good, hot or cold, but aunty would never let me have a second helping. She wouldn't even let me have as much bread as I wanted and only one little dish of strawberries. I filled up on raw eggs, all I could find in the nests. But, my, six days of raw eggs was five days too many for me. I'm wild for cabbage, all I want, and pork, big hunks of it."

She got it and slept a sound night's sleep.

The next day she craved an outing on foot. Her mother, prone to the shortest cut to peace on all occasions, acquiesced at once and let her go out with her one-eyed maid, Utta.

Utta, born somewhere beyond the Rhine, had been brought to Rome when a small child and had no memo-

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ries except memories of Italy. She was the most placid and acquiescent creature imaginable. Her little mistress led her first of all to the nearest pastry-cook's shop where the two ate till they could not swallow another crumb.

Brinnaria, like many eccentric children born to wealth and position, had special favorites, almost cronies, among the lowly. Chief among them was the old sieve-maker of the Via Sacra. To his shop she made Utta lead her. Utta interposed no objection. Utta never objected to anything. But in this case she was especially complaisant, since opposite the sieve-maker's was a fascinating embroidery shop, the keeper of which was entirely willing, when he had no customers, to let Utta lounge on one of his sofas and inspect embroideries to her heart's content. So lounging, rapt in the contemplation of Egyptian appliqués, Syrian gold-thread borders, Spanish linen-work, silk flower patterns from Cos, Parthian animal designs and Celtic cord-labyrinths after originals in leather thongs, Utta could glance up from time to time and make sure that her charge was safe with the sieve-maker.

Safe she would have been without any maid to watch her, for old Truttidius adored her. He was a small, hale, merry, wizened man, his seamed and wrinkled face brown as a berry in spite of his lifelong habit of indoor labor and comparative inertia. He had more than a little tact and was an excellent listener. Brinnaria was entirely at ease with him.

His shop was rather large for those days, nearly fifteen feet wide and fully twenty deep. It faced directly on the street, from which it was separated only by the stone counter which occupied all the front except a narrow entrance at one side. Above the counter

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projected the heavy shutters which closed the shop at night and which, being hinged at the top, were by day pushed upward and outward so as to form a sort of pent like a wooden substitute for an awning. The entrance by the end of the counter was closed by a solid little gate. Behind the counter was the low stool from which Truttidius rose to chaffer with customers, and on which, when not occupied in trading, he sat at work, his bench and brazier by his side, his tools hanging on the wall by his hand, orderly in their neat racks or on their neat rows of hooks. Except for the trifling wall-space which they occupied, the walls were hidden under sieves hanging close together; bronze sieves, copper sieves, rush sieves with rims of white willow wood, white horse-hair sieves whose hoops were stout ash, sieves of black horse-hair stretched in rims of clean steamed oak and linen sieves hooped about with birch. Sieves were piled on the counter, mostly fancy sieves with hoops of carved wood strung with black and white horse-hair interlaced in bold patterns, or copper sieves, polished till they shone, they being most likely to catch the eyes of the passing throng.

Brinnaria, sprawled on the sofa against the wall behind the work-bench, surveyed her surroundings and sighed happily, entirely at home. Truttidius was beating copper wire, a process always fascinating to watch.

"I've had an awful time in the country with Aunt Septima," Brinnaria chatted, "and I had an awful scare before they sent me to the country. Daddy threatened to make me a Vestal."

"In place of Rabulla?" Truttidius queried, glancing up.

"Yes," Brinnaria answered, "but I got off; my, but I was scared though."

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"You didn't want to be a Vestal?" Truttidius asked, eyeing her over his work.

"Not I!" Brinnaria declared. "I can't think of anything worse except being killed."

"Well," mused Truttidius, "there is no accounting for tastes. Most girls would be wild with delight at the idea. But there would be no sense in being a Vestal unless you wanted to be one."

"I don't," Brinnaria proclaimed emphatically, "but I have been thinking about Vestals ever since Daddy threatened me and scared me so; I've been thinking about Vestals and sieves. Did anybody ever really carry water in a sieve, Truttidius?"

"Water in a sieve?" the old man exclaimed. "Not anybody that ever I saw. What do you mean?"

"You must have heard the story of Tuccia, the Vestal," Brinnaria wondered, wide-eyed. "She lived ages ago, before Hannibal invaded Italy, when everything was different. They said she was bad and she said it was a lie and they said she could not prove it was a lie and she said she could. She said if she was all she ought to be the Goddess would show it by answering her prayer. And she took a sieve and walked down to the river, right by the end of the Sublician bridge, where the stairs are on the right-hand side. And the five other Vestals, and the flamens, and all the priests, and the Pontifex, and the consuls went with her. And she stood on the lowest step with her toes in the water and prayed out loud to the Goddess to help her and show that she had told the truth and then she stooped over and dipped up water with her sacrificing ladle and poured it into the sieve and it didn't run through, and she dipped up more and more until the sieve was half full of water, as if it had been a pan. And then

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she hung her ladle at her girdle-hook and took the sieve in both hands and carried the water all the way to the temple. And everybody said that that proved that she had told the truth.

That's the story. Had you ever heard it?"

"Yes, little lady," Truttidius said, "I have heard it."

"What I want to know," Brinnaria pursued, "is this: Is it a made-up story or is it a true story?"

"Little lady," spoke Truttidius, "it is impious to doubt the truth of pious stories handed down from days of old."

"That isn't answering my question," said the practical Brinnaria. "What I want you to tell me is to say right out plain do you believe it. Did anybody really ever carry water in a sieve?"

"You must remember, dear little lady," the sieve-maker said, "that she was a most holy priestess, most pleasing in the eyes of her Goddess, that she was in dire straits and that she prayed to the Goddess to aid her. The Goddess helped her votary; the gods can do all things."

"The gods can do all things," Brinnaria echoed, her eyes flashing, "but the gods don't do all things, not even for their favorites. There are lots and lots of things no god ever did for any votary or ever will. What I want to know is this: Is carrying water in a sieve one of the things the gods not only can do but do do? Did anybody ever carry water in a sieve truly?"

Truttidius smiled, his wrinkles doubling and quadrupling till his face was all a network of tiny folds of hard, dry skin. He put down his work and regarded his guest, his face serious after the fading of his brief smile. The soft-footed sandalled throng that packed

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the narrow street shuffled and padded by unnoticed. No customer interrupted them. They might have been alone in a Sibyl's cell on a mountain side.

"Little lady," spoke the sieve-maker, "you are, indeed, very old for your age, not only in height and build, but in heart and mind. What other child would bother her head about so subtle a problem? What other child would perceive the verity at the heart of the puzzle and put it so neatly in so few words? To you an old man cannot help talking as to an experienced matron, because to you an old man can talk as to a woman of sense. You deserve to be answered in the spirit of the question."

He reflected. Brinnaria, fascinated and curious, hardly breathed in her intentness, watching his face and waiting for his answer.

"Little lady," he said, after a long silence, "the gods can, indeed, do all things. But as you have yourself perceived the gods do not do all things, even for their favorites. The gods work miracles to vindicate their votaries, but as you divine, each miracle is the happening by the special ordinance of the gods of what might happen even without their mandate, but which does not happen because it is only once in countless ages that all the circumstances necessary to bring about that sort of happening concur to produce so unusual an effect. What folks call a miracle is the occurrence, by the beneficent will of heaven, at just the right time and place, of what might happen anywhere to any one, but almost never does happen anywhere to any one, because it is so unlikely that all things should conspire to bring about so unlikely a result.

"So of carrying water in a sieve.

"Anybody might carry water in a sieve any day. But

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very seldom, oh, very, very seldom can it come to pass that the kind of person capable of carrying water in a sieve can be just in the condition of muscle and mood to do so and can at just that moment be in possession of just the kind of sieve that will hold water and not let it through. For an actual breathing woman of flesh and blood to carry water in a real ordinary sieve of rush-fibres, or linen thread or horse-hair or metal wire, in such a sieve as pastry-cooks use to sift their finest flour, for that to happen in broad daylight under the open sky before a crowd of onlookers, that requires the special intervention of the blessed gods, or of the most powerful of them. And not even all of them together could make that happen to a woman of ordinary quality of hand and eye, with a usual sieve, as most sieves are."

"Explain!" Brinnaria half whispered. "What kind of woman could actually carry water in a sieve and in what kind of a sieve, and under what circumstances?"

"That's three questions," Truttidius counted, "and one at a time is enough.

"In the first place, no god, not all the gods together, could give any votary power to carry water in a sieve, be it rush or linen or horse-hair or metal, of which the meshes had been first scrubbed with natron or embalmers' salt or wood-ashes or fullers'-earth. Water would run through such a sieve, did even all the gods will that it be retained. No one ever dipped a sieve into water and brought it up with water in it and saw that water retained by the meshes. Once wet the under side of a sieve and water will run through to the last drop.

"But if a sieve were ever so little greasy or oily, not dripping with oil or clogged with grease, but greasy as a working slave's finger is greasy on a hot day; if such

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a sieve were free of any drop of water on the underside, if into such a sieve water were slowly and carefully poured, as you say that Tuccia in the story ladled water into her sieve with her libation-dipper, then that water might spread evenly over the meshes to the rim all around, might deepen till it was as deep as the width of two fingers or of three, and might be retained by the meshes even for an hour, even while the sieve was carried over a rough road, up hill and down, through crowded streets.

"But few are the women who could so carry a sieve of water or could even so hold it that the water would not run through at once."

"How could the water be retained at all?" queried Brinnaria the practical. "What is the explanation?"

Truttidius wrinkled up his face in deep thought.

"You have seen wine spilled at dinner," he illustrated. "You have seen a drop of it or a splash of it fall on a sofa-cover, and you have seen it soak in and leave an ugly stain?"

"Of course," Brinnaria agreed, "often and often."

"And then again, not very often," the sieve-maker went on, "you see a patch of spilt wine stand up on a perfectly dry fabric, and remain there awhile without soaking in, its surface shining wet and its edges gleaming round and smooth and curved, bright as a star. Well, the retaining of water in a sieve by the open meshes is like the momentary holding up of spilt wine on a woven fabric. I can't explain any better, but the two happenings are similar, only the not soaking in of the splashed liquid is far, oh, far more frequent, countless, uncountable times more frequent, than the sustaining of fluid in a sieve. But as the one can happen and does, so the other could happen and might."

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"I see," Brinnaria breathed. "You have made me see that. Now, next point: How must the sieve be held?"

The old man smiled again.

"You keep close to the subject," he chuckled. "You talk like a grandmother of consuls. You have a head on your shoulders."

"That does not answer my question," Brinnaria persisted.

"Your question is easily answered," he said. "For the miracle to happen, in fact, the sieve must be held as level as the top rail of a mason's T-shaped plumb-line frame, and as steady as if clamped in a vise. For a woman to carry water in a sieve the weather must be dry, for in damp weather the water would run through the meshes, even if the threads or wires were just oily enough and not too oily, even if the meshes were just the right size to favor the forming in each mesh of a little pocket of water underneath, like the edges of the upstanding drop of wine on a sofa-cushion. I don't know how it comes to pass, but somehow, if all the conditions are right, little bags of water form on the underside of a sieve, one to each mesh, like drops after a rain hanging from the edge of my shop-shutters, or from the mutules on the cornice of a temple. They are capable of sustaining one or even two finger-thicknesses of water on the upper side of the sieve-web. But if the sieve-web is unevenly woven or unevenly stretched, it will not retain water an instant, and if the sieve-web bags anywhere the water, even if the rest of the sieve-web promises to retain it, will run through at that point. And even if the sieve is perfect, the slightest tilt, the very slightest tilt, will cause the little bags of water to break at the lowest point, and so start all

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the water to running through. I know; I have tried; I have seen the sieve hold up the water for some breaths. But for the marvel to last any length of time, that would require the intervention of the gods; that would be a miracle. For a woman to hold a sieve so that it would retain water would mean that her hand was as steady as the hand of a sleep-walker or of the priestess of Isis in her trance in the great yearly mystery-festival. That could happen seldom to any woman; such a woman would be rare."

"I see," Brinnaria barely whispered, so intent was she on the old man's words. "Now, what kind of woman could do such a wonder?"

"A very exceptional and unusual kind of woman," the old man declared. "Women, the run of them, are not steady-handed. Even steady-handed women are easily distracted, their attention is readily called away from any definite task. Even a woman usually steady-handed would find her hand tremble if she were conscious of guilt, even a woman high-hearted with her sense of her own worthiness might glance aside at some one in a great crowd of people about her, might let her thoughts wander.

"That is where the miracle would come in. Only a woman directly favored by the mighty gods could so ignore the throng about her, could so forget herself, could so concentrate all her faculties on the receptacle she held, could so perfectly control her muscles or could so completely let her muscles act undisturbed by her will, could possess muscles capable of so long tension at so perfect an adjustment."

"I see," Brinnaria sighed. "The thing may have happened in fact, may happen again, but it could happen only once out of ten times ten thousand times ten

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thousand chances. I understand. It is a possibility in the ordinary course of events. It was a miracle if it ever took place; it will be a miracle if it ever comes to pass again. It is not impossible, but it's too improbable for anybody to believe it could be, in fact."

"You have it," the sieve-maker assured her.

"I'm glad I have," she said. "Now it'll go out of my head and quit bothering me. I've thought about it day and night ever since Daddy threatened me. Now I'll forget it and sleep sound."

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CHAPTER III

STUTTERINGS

WHEN Brinnaria returned from her outing she found waiting for her her best friend, chum and crony, Flexinna, a girl four years older, not so tall, decidedly more slender and much prettier. Brinnaria was robustly handsome; Flexinna was delicately lovely, yet they did not differ much in tints of hair, eyes or skin and might have been sisters. In fact, they were not infrequently taken for sisters.

They chatted of their girlish interests and of local gossip and family news, like any pair of girls, until Brinnaria described the escapade that led to her rustication.

Flexinna's eyes were wide and wider as she listened.

"D-d-do-you really m-m-mean," she stuttered, "that you had a c-c-chance to be a V-V-Vestal and d-d-didn't jump at it?"

"Jump at it!" exclaimed Brinnaria. "I jumped away from it! I can't think of anything, except death, that would fill me with more horror than the very idea of being made a Vestal. It makes me shiver now just to speak of it."

"You're a f-f-fool," Flexinna declared, "the f-f-foolest kind of a f-f-fool. This is the f-f-first f-f-foolish thing I ever knew you to d-d-do. I always th-th-thought you s-s-so s-s-sensible, t-t-too. And you've m-m-missed a ch-ch-chance to be a V-V-Vestal. I've n-n-no p-p-pa-

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tience with you. Any other g-g-girl would j-j-jump at the ch-ch-chance."

"Jump at it!" cried Brinnaria. "Why?"

"Why?" sneered Flexinna, blazing with excitement. "Why, just think what you've m-m-missed! You're as wild as I am to see g-g-gladiators fight, k-k-keener than I am to see a real horse-race in the circus, and you'll have to wait until you're g-g-grown up, as I'll have to, before you s-s-see either. And you'd have g-g-gone to every spectacle, from the very day you were t-t-taken, and not have m-m-missed one. Think of it! F-F-Front seats in the circus, front seats in the amphitheatre, all your life, or for thirty years at least, for certain! And you've m-m-missed it. And that's not half. Your lictor to c-c-clear the way for you whenever you g-g-go out and your choice to g-g-go out in your litter with eight b-b-bearers or in your c-c-carriage, your own c-c-carriage, all your own, and the right to d-d-drive anywhere in the city any d-d-day in the year. Oh, you f-f-fool, you s-s-silly f-f-fool! A ch-ch-chance to be one of the s-s-seven m-m-most imp-p-portant women in Rome, one of the s-s-six who are on a level with the Empress, and you m-m-missed it! Fancy it; to b-b-be m-m-mistress of an income so large that it m-m-makes you d-d-dizzy to think of it, and you throw away the ch-ch-chance! To be able the m-m-moment you were taken, to m-m-make your own w-w-will! To have every legacy c-c-cadger in Rome running after you and m-m-making you p-p-presents and d-d-doing you favors and angling for your n-n-notice all your l-l-life l-l-long, and you m-m-miss the ch-ch-chance!"

"Yes," Brinnaria admitted, reflectively, "I have missed all that, that's so. But that's not all there is to think of, when you think about being a Vestal. I've

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missed a lot of fine privileges, mighty valuable to any girl that would care for that sort of thing; but I've escaped a lot of things that would go with those privileges. I love bright colors, I always did and I look ghastly in white—I look like a ghost. And I'd have had to wear white and nothing else, even white flowers, like a corpse. And a Vestal has to keep her eyes on the ground and walk slow and stately and stand straight and dignified, and talk soft and low. I'd suffer, even if I could learn all the tricks they teach them as well as Gargilia has. And I don't believe I ever could. I'd keep my eyes cast down for a month or a year and then, right in the middle of a sacrifice, I'd see something funny, like the gander squawking under the feet of the pall-bearers at poor old Gibba's funeral at the farm last summer, and I'd wink at the head Vestal or roll my eyes at the whole congregation and spoil the prayers; or, after keeping meek and mum for a year or so I'd be so wild to laugh that I'd roar right out and break up the whole service. I think I'm the last girl alive to be a Vestal. A Vestal mustn't answer back or make a pun, no matter how good a chance she gets. I just can't help cutting in, if I see a chance; the words come out of my mouth before I know it, and, if I trained myself to keep still and look as mild as a lamb, I'd be boiling inside and sometime I'd burst out with a yell just to relieve my feelings or I'd jab a shawl-pin into the Pontifex to see him jump, or put out my toe and trip up somebody just to see him sprawl. I couldn't help it. The more I'd bottle myself up the farther the naughtiness in me would spurt when it burst through the skin. I know. No Vestaling for me! I wasn't born for that trade!"

"Nonsense!" Flexinna disclaimed vigorously. "You'd

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g-g-get used to the whole thing in a m-m-month and be the most s-s-statuesque of the six in t-t-ten years. Think of it! I'm just raging inside at your f-f-folly. To have the right to an interview with the Emperor whenever you d-d-demand it, to see the m-m-magistrates' lictors lower their fasces to you and s-s-stand aside at the s-s-salute and let you p-p-pass whenever you m-m-meet them in p-p-public. To live in one of the finest p-p-palaces in Rome, one of the most m-m-magnificent residences on earth, to have the ch-ch-chance at all that and m-m-miss it; I've no p-p-patience with you!"

"That's all very fine," Brinnaria countered, "but there's much to be said on the other side. I've been in the Atrium. Aunt Septima took me there to call on Causidiena. It's big, it's gorgeous, it's luxurious, that's all true. But I love sunlight. I'd loathe living in that hole in the ground; why, the shadow of the Palace falls across the courtyard before noon and for all the rest of the day it's gloomy as the bottom of a well. I heard Causidiena tell Aunt Septima how shoes mould and embroideries mildew and what a time they have with the inlays popping off the furniture on account of the dampness and about the walls and lamp-standards sweating moisture. I'd hate the dark, poky, cold place."

"Oh," Flexinna admitted, "there are d-d-drawbacks to any s-s-situation in life, but, really the higher the s-s-station the fewer the drawbacks. The p-p-plain truth is that being a Vestal is the highest s-s-station in Rome except being an Empress. No g-g-girl dare aspire to be an Empress; it would be treason. If any g-g-girl d-d-dreams of it she k-k-keeps her d-d-dreams to herself. But any g-g-girl has a right to aspire to

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be a V-V-Vestal, if she is made perfect and is under ten and has her f-f-father and m-m-mother noble and alive. You've got all that and you are offered what any g-g-girl would envy you and you throw it away! I've no p-p-patience with you."

"You forget," Brinnaria argued, "that I'm in love with Almo and I'd have to give up Almo."

"Not f-f-forever," Flexinna retorted. "He's enough in love with you to wait for you, to wait for you! You could have pledged him to wait till your term of service was up and then you two could have married just the same."

"Just the same!" Brinnaria echoed. "A lot of good it'd do me to marry after I'd be an old wrinkled, gray-haired woman of forty, dried up and withered."

"Nemestronia," Flexinna cited, "has married twice since she was forty, and she's not withered yet, not by a great deal, even if she is gray-haired and has a wrinkle or two."

"What's the use of arguing," Brinnaria summed up. "I hate the very idea of being a Vestal. I'd hate the fact a million times more. I'd hate it even if I were not in love with Almo, furiously in love with Almo. Daddy says I've got to wait four years to marry him. I roll round in bed and bite the pillows with rage to think of it, night after night. A fine figure I'd cut trying to wait thirty years for him. I'd swoon with longing for him and write him a note or peep out of the temple to see him go by and then I'd get accused of misbehavior, and accused is convicted for a Vestal; well, you know it. I'd look fine being buried alive in a seven-by-five underground stone cell, with half a pint of milk and a gill of wine to keep me alive long enough to suffer longer before I starved to death and a thimbleful of

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oil in a lamp to make me more scared of the dark when the lamp burned out. No burial alive for me. I'm in love. I'm too much in love to balance arguments. I'm not sorry I missed my chance, as you call it. I'm glad I escaped; the chance isn't missed for that matter. Rabulla's place hasn't been filled yet."

"Do you know who is g-g-going to be ch-ch-chosen to fill it?" Flexinna asked. "You d-d-don't? The choice has about narrowed d-d-down to that execrable, weasel-faced little M-M-Meffia."

"Meffia!" Brinnaria cried. "There's no one alive I despise as much as that detestable ninny. I've a mind to chuck Almo and ask Daddy to offer me, just to spite Meffia."

"Why d-d-don't you?" Flexinna stuttered. "D-d-do it n-n-now, right n-n-now. You might be t-t-too late."

"Oh bosh," Brinnaria groaned. "What's the use of talking nonsense? What would be the sense in my spoiling my life to spite Meffia? I hate her. I'll hate to see her putting on airs as a Vestal, but I'd hate worse to be a Vestal myself, and worst of all to lose Almo. I just couldn't give up Almo."

"I wish I were you," Flexinna raged. "If I were only under ten and d-d-didn't s-s-stutter, I'd d-d-do all I c-c-could to g-g-get D-D-Daddy to offer m-m-me."

"Bosh!" Brinnaria sneered. "You're in love with Vocco and you know you wouldn't even think of giving him up if you had the chance."

"Just wouldn't I!" Flexinna retorted. "I love Quintus dearly. But if I had a ch-ch-chance to be a V-V-Vestal, I'd fling poor Quintus hard and never regret him. Not I. Think of the influence a V-V-Vestal has! Every man who wants p-p-promotion in the army or in the fleet, or who wants an appointment to any

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office would set his sisters and all his women relations to besieging me to use my influence for him. Every temple-carver and shrine-painter in Rome would have his wife showing me attentions. I know; I've heard the talk.

"And b-b-besides, in all the Empire a Vestal is the nearest thing to a p-p-princess we have. We read a lot about Egyptian princesses, and Asiatic princesses and we hear about P-P-Parthian p-p-princesses, but the only p-p-princesses we ever see are the Vestals. They are the only p-p-princesses in the Empire, in Italy, in Rome, the six of them. And you had a chance to be one of the only six p-p-princesses in our world and you didn't take it. Oh, you f-f-fool, you f-f-fool!"

They wrangled about their conflicting views for a long time.

It was only as Flexinna was leaving that she inquired casually:

"Have you heard what Rabulla d-d-died of?"

"No," said Brinnaria. "What was it?"

"Hadn't you heard?" Flexinna wondered. "It was the p-p-pestilence."

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CHAPTER IV

PESTILENCE

PESTILENCE!

Brinnaria heard the word often during the next few days. Rome talked of little else. It had begun with a few deaths along the river front in the sailors' quarters, and among the stevedores and porters of the grain-warehouses, southwest of the Aventine Hill in the thirteenth ward. Next it came to notice when there were many deaths along the Subura in the very centre of the city. From there the infection had spread to every wind. Panic seized the people. There was an exodus of all who could afford it, to their country estates, to the mountains, to the seaside. Brinnarius and Quartilla discussed arrangements for their departure to his mountain farm in the Sabine hills above Carsioli. Their difficulty was to decide to whom to commit their great house in Rome. They had no slave whom they implicitly trusted, and no one certainly who would be willing to stay in the city. To close the house was to invite burglary, for in the general panic watchmen were unreliable and house-breakings were frequent. Into their consultation Brinnaria thrust herself uninvited.

"Why don't you leave me in town?" she suggested. "I hate the country and I hate it near Carsioli worse than any neighborhood I ever saw. I want to stay right here. I love Rome. And I'm not afraid of pestilence. Nobody can die more than once and nobody dies till the

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gods will it. There's more danger of dying of fright and worry than of pestilence. Anyhow a pestilence never kills all the people in a city, most of the townsfolk stay right at home and keep alive all right. Half the people that die scare or fret themselves to death. I won't fret or worry and I'll keep well here; but if you take me with you I'll be miserable and chafe myself ill. I can run the house as well as mother can. Most of the slaves worship me and will obey me for love, the rest are deadly afraid of me and will not dare to disobey me. I'll keep order and I will not waste a sesterce. Can't I stay, Father?"

Brinnarius knit his brows and looked at his wife. Her eyes answered his.

"It would save a deal of trouble," he said, reflectively.

"It would make a deal of gossip," Quartilla declared. "All my enemies would say that I am an unnatural mother, that I do not love my youngest child, that I hate her, that I am exposing her to certain death, that I am as bad as a murderess."

"Nonsense!" her husband retorted. "We can't bother about all the malice of all the slanderers in Rome. Other people's daughters are remaining. Lucconius means to stay here in Rome with his family. If he ventures to keep Flexinna here we might venture to leave Brinnaria behind."

"You might," that self-assertive child cut in, "and you know there is really no use in taking me if I do not want to go. You know how much trouble it will make for both of you."

Quartilla sighed.

"Perhaps we had best leave her," she said. "Certainly the house will be safe and the slaves kept in order. I shan't have an instant's anxiety about that. Then

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Brinnaria is so genuinely brave that she will really not dread the pestilence, and all the doctors say that there is nothing like that feeling to protect any one from the danger. She makes me feel that she will be safe. I don't believe I'll worry about that either."

"Fine!" Brinnaria squealed. "I'm to stay."

"Not so fast," her father rebuked her. "I haven't said yet that you may stay. But if I say so, then you must stay. I'll not have you changing your mind and deciding to leave Rome after we have arranged to put you in charge here. It would make trouble indeed to have you shutting up this house in a hurry and chasing after us to Carsioli."

"Epulo!" his wife reproached him, "the child has her faults, but changeableness is not one of them. She is the most resolute child I ever knew. If you leave her, she will not fail us. If she gives her word she will keep it. I never knew Brinnaria to break an earnestly made promise."

"Will you promise?" her father asked her.

"I promise," Brinnaria shouted, "I pledge myself. I take oath. I swear by my love of both of you, by my respect for our clan, by my hopes of marrying Almo, that I'll stick it out here in Rome, in this house, going out only when necessary, unless you send for me to come away. If anything happens that makes me think I ought to leave the city I shall send a message to you, but I shall not cross the city boundaries nor relax my watch on this house without your permission. I swear."

"That's enough, dearie," her father said, "enough and too much. If your judgment tells you that you ought to flee from Rome, you have my permission to send me a messenger; I know you will not resort to that without real need. I rely on your judgment. The

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gods be with you, child. You have taken a load off my shoulders, two loads, in fact."

Thereupon preparations for departure were pushed and soon after sunrise on the next day Brinnaria found herself left to her own resources, responsible for the welfare of a large retinue of obsequious slaves, autocrat over them, and mistress of one of the largest private houses in Rome. She acquitted herself well of her duties. She had been right in claiming that she was loved by most and feared by the rest. Certainly she was trusted and respected by all as if she had been five times her age. She made them as comfortable as town-slaves could be and they knew it. To her they accorded instant and implicit obedience. The life of the household went on as smoothly as if the master had been at home. And its life was not gloomy. Although the main subject of conversation was the pestilence, open forebodings were not indulged in and the house was outwardly cheerful.

Equally cheerful was Flexinna, whom Brinnaria saw daily. Neither of them had the slightest fear of the pestilence and no member of either household had shown the slightest symptoms of any kind of illness. Of the daily deaths among their large acquaintance or among the nobilities of the city, they talked calmly, without any feeling of gloom or of dread, secure in the confidence of youth and health.

On the tenth day after Brinnaria had been left to her own devices Flexinna visited her as usual. Early in their talk she said:

"D-D-Dossonia died last night."

"The Chief Vestal?" Brinnaria queried.

"Yes," Flexinna replied, a bright tear in each eye.

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"She couldn't live forever," Brinnaria said. "She was ninety-four, wasn't she?"

"Ninety-four years and eight months yesterday," Flexinna replied. "She had been Chief Vestal ever since C-C-Calpurnia P-P-Prætextata died, and that's fifty-six years ago. She had been Chief Vestal longer than any ever and she had lived longer than any Vestal ever."

"Well," said Brinnaria, the practical, "she ought to have been glad to go, and she stone blind for twenty years."

"Yes, I know," Flexinna rejoined, "but she was such an old d-d-dear, she looked so much younger than her age, her face so healthy and pink, and b-b-beautiful even with all its wrinkles, so calm and placid and holy. I loved to look at her sitting in her big chair like a great white b-b-butterfly, so plump and handsome and soft-looking. She always put out her hand to my face and recognized me at the first t-t-touch, almost, and gave me her blessing so b-b-beautifully. Sometimes Manlia let me read to the old dear, and she always seemed to enjoy it so much. I'm real shaken at her d-d-death. I really loved her."

"Everybody loved her," Brinnaria declared. "But everybody loves Causidiena too, and she's Chief Vestal now. She's not fat and placid like Dossonia, but she is wonderfully dignified. My, I admire that woman!"

"I wonder," Flexinna reflected, "who will be chosen in her p-p-place."

"Poor wretch!" Brinnaria commented. "I'm sorry for her, whoever she is. Just think, she'll have to pair with that unspeakable little muff of a Meffia. I hate that girl."

"Whoever she is," Flexinna continued, "she is sure to be chosen and taken mighty quick. For with this

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p-p-pestilence in the city, and all the trouble the P-P-Parthians are making in the East, and the raids of the Marcomanni on the Rhine colonies, and the thunder-storms that have raged about lately, there'll be need felt for all the p-p-prayers all the Vestals can offer. They'll not leave the vacancy open long. I'll bet they have it filled by d-d-day after to-morrow. Old B-B-Bambilio is a stickler for pious precision and exact observance of all ritual matters and the Emperors are with him."

"Marcus is," Brinnaria agreed, pertly, "but Lucius doesn't care what happens so long as he has his fun."

"You mustn't t-t-talk that way about the Emperors," Flexinna cautioned her. "If you were overheard you'd get into no end of trouble. Anyhow, Verus defers to Aurelius in everything, so that whatever Aurelius wishes is as if both wished it. And there never was a more p-p-pious Emperor than Aurelius. So the place is certain to be filled p-p-promptly."

"At once, for sure," Brinnaria agreed. "I wonder who the victim will be? Do you suppose it will be Occurnea?"

"It would have been Occurnea, I think," Flexinna said. "You know it was a chance for a while whether she'd get it instead of Meffia. But she's not eligible now. Her mother d-d-died yesterday."

"Tallentia, perhaps," Brinnaria hazarded.

"Impossible," Flexinna declared. "You remember how recklessly she rode and how her horse f-f-fell on her. She has limped ever since and always will."

"Cuppiena?" suggested Brinnaria.

"Not she," said Flexinna; "she has some k-k-kind of skin rash and has lost almost all her hair."

"Sabbia," Brinnaria proposed.

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"Her mother's d-d-dead too," Flexinna reminded her; "has been for months."

"Fremnia," came the next suggestion.

"She's off to Aquileia with her family," said Flexinna; "they all left the d-d-day your folks went."

"Eppia," ventured Brinnaria.

"She's ten years old now," Flexinna demurred. "She celebrated her b-b-birthday three days before the Kalends. I was at the party."

"Pennasia, perhaps," Brinnaria suggested.

"D-d-deaf in one ear like her mother and grandmother," said Flexinna, "and you know it."

"Licinia," Brinnaria ventured.

"She'd be the last they'd choose on account of the b-b-bad luck Vestals of her family have had," Flexinna reminded her. "The very name suggests disgrace. Anyhow, she's in Baiæ with her p-p-people."

"Rentulàna," came the next conjecture.

"Has a b-b-big wen on the side of her head," Flexinna proclaimed.

"Numledia?" came next.

"You've lost your memory, Brinnaria," said Flexinna, severely. "She's got a b-b-big purple birthmark on her neck."

"Magnonia," Brinnaria proposed.

"She's far away, in Britain, with her father and mother; might as well be out of the world."

Brinnaria was at a loss. She meditated.

"Gavinna!" she said at last.

"She has a bad squint and you know it," laughed Flexinna. "Why don't you think of an eligible c-c-candidate?"

They tried a dozen more names, all of girls out of

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the city or defective in some way, or with one parent dead.

"But who will it be?" Brinnaria wondered. "It's bound to be somebody and quick."

She jumped to her feet.

She screamed.

"They'll take me! They'll take me! Oh, what am I to do, what am I to do? I'm the only possible candidate in the city. And they'll be after me the moment they run over the lists and find no one else is in town."

She stood a moment, considering, then she called Guntello, and a lean Caledonian slave called Intinco. She gave them each a written journey-order to show to any patrol that questioned them, told Guntello to take the best horse in the stable and to give the next best to Intinco, bade Intinco ride to Carsioli and Guntello to Falerii, gave Guntello a letter for Almo and Intinco a letter to her father and told them verbally, in case the letter was lost, to make it plain that she was in danger of being taken for a Vestal and bid her father come quickly to interfere and her lover to ride fast to claim her in time. She enjoined both slaves to spur their horses, gave them money in case they needed to hire fresh mounts and wound up:

"Kill Rhæbus, kill Xanthus, kill as many hired horses as need be, ride without halt or mercy. Get there and get father and Almo here. Be quick. You can't be too quick."

She watched them ride off at a sedate walk, for no man was allowed to trot a horse in the streets of Rome. Both had assured her that they would ride at full gallop from the moment they passed the gates.

Then began for Brinnaria a tense and anxious period of waiting. Flexinna obtained her parents' permission

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and remained with her friend. The entire household continued in good health and there was nothing to distract the two from their dread on the one hand that the Pontifex might come to claim Brinnaria before Almo and her father arrived, and their hope on the other hand of seeing them come in time.

On the whole the strain told on Flexinna more than on Brinnaria, who never once shed a tear, attended to her house-wifely duties calmly and steadily and talked little. Flexinna fidgeted constantly and talked a good deal.

"If I were in your place," she said, "I shouldn't be waiting here inertly for Faltonius to come and claim me. Instead of dispatching messengers for your father and Almo, you ought to have left the city at once and made your best speed for Carsioli yourself."

"I couldn't," Brinnaria declared, "and you know why. I passed my word to stay in this house and not so much as to go out unless some compelling necessity arose. I pledged myself not to leave here unless I sent a messenger saying I needed to leave and received permission before I started. I took my oath not to cross the city limits without Father's consent. I can't break my oath and I shouldn't break my word, even if I hadn't sworn in addition to promising."

"You f-f-fool!" Flexinna declared.

"All members of our clan keep their word," said Brinnaria proudly. "We do not ask whether it is advantageous to keep our word or pleasant; when we have passed our word we keep it. I've given my word and there's nothing to do but to wait for Almo and Daddy and hope that both, or at least a message from Daddy will get here before Faltonius."

"There is something else you might do," Flexinna

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suggested. "You might easily arrange to be ineligible before Bambilio comes for you."

"I shall," spoke the matter-of-fact Brinnaria. "The moment Daddy and Almo come, I'll be Almo's wife in less time than it takes to tell it and will be able to snap my fingers at Bambilio."

"Suppose he comes before your father," Flexinna suggested.

"I'd be a Vestal and all hope gone," said Brinnaria.

"I mean," said Flexinna, "suppose Almo comes before your father."

"I've thought of that," Brinnaria admitted. "But I'd hate to break the record of which our family is so proud. None of our women ever were so much as accused of any misbehavior before marriage."

"I've no p-p-patience with you," Flexinna raged. "You'll throw away your life for a mere scruple. You risk being made a Vestal every moment. Faltonius may be on the way here now. If I were in your place I'd make sure. I'd not wait for Almo. Any lad would do for me. You c-c-could make sure, if you had sense. Almo would forgive you and marry you anyway. Your father would forgive you; he'd never approve, I know."

"Not he!" Brinnaria proclaimed, "and he'll never have any such dishonor to forgive. No man of our clan ever had reason to be ashamed of his daughter or of his sister. I'll not be the first to disgrace the clan. If Faltonius comes he'll find me as eligible as the hour I was born, unless Daddy and Almo come in time for me to be married first."

"At least," Flexinna persisted, "you might say no when he asks you. That would stall the whole ceremony and give you t-t-time."

"Do you suppose," Brinnaria sneered, "that I

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haven't thought of that? I'm tempted, of course. But that would be to advertise myself a disgrace to the clan and would be as bad as if I were in fact. I couldn't do that. And I couldn't stomach telling a lie to the Pontifex during a solemn interrogatory."

"At least," Flexinna pleaded, "you might say you are over age. You look sixteen to anybody, and no one would imagine you are under fourteen. You could halt the proceedings, at least, and gain t-t-time."

"Faltonius has the lists," said Brinnaria wearily, "with all the birthdays sworn to by both parents for every girl on them and attested by four excellent witnesses, besides. He'd know I was lying and it would do me no good."

Flexinna changed the subject.

But when the next day dawned and neither Brinnarius nor Almo appeared, she returned to the attack. Brinnaria was very pale, very tense, but obdurate. She controlled herself, did not forget, did not express her feelings, but she posted a slave at each street corner, right and left of the house-door, and had them look out for what she hoped and what she feared.

Dastor brought word that the Pontifex and his retinue were approaching; three litters, each with eight bearers, preceded by the lictor of the Chief Vestal.

Brinnaria, pale and tense, did her best to look collected and controlled. She succeeded well, heard calmly the announcement of her august visitors, ordered them shown into the atrium, and received them with proper dignity. Her self-possession did not desert her when she recognized in the train of the Pontifex her rejected suitor Calvaster, sly, malignant and with an air of suppressed elation.

Faltonius Bambilio, the Pontifex of Vesta, was a

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pursy, pudgy, pompous old man, immensely self-important, almost ridiculous in his fussiness, but clothed with a certain impressiveness by the mere fact of his religious office. He gazed about him, stared at Brinnaria, hemmed and hawed and threw himself into poses intended to be stately.

With him was Causidiena, now Chief Vestal, a tall, spare woman of about forty-five, her austere face kindly and reassuring, her dark hair barely showing under her official head-dress, a statuesque figure in her white robes of office.

"My daughter," spoke Faltonius to Brinnaria, "Rome has but five Vestals. I have come to take you into the vacant place. You have been chosen, as best suited to this high dignity, from among those whose names were on the lists of those fit for the office. Was it proper that your name should be on the lists?"

"I believe so," spoke Brinnaria, weakly, almost in a whisper.

"Are you fit to be taken as a Vestal, my daughter?"

"I believe so," came the answer.

"Have you any blemish or defect of body, any impediment of speech, any difficulty of hearing?"

Brinnaria's awe was wearing off, and the irritating pomposity of Faltonius was producing its usual effect of arousing antagonism, as it generally did in those he talked to. Brinnaria felt all her wild self surge up in her.

"I'm sound as a two-year-old racing filly," she replied. "I'm clean as fresh curd; I hear you perfectly and you can hear me perfectly."

Bambilio bristled like a bantam rooster.

"That is not the way for a Vestal to speak," he rebuked.

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"I'm not a Vestal yet," Brinnaria retorted, "and that was my answer to those questions. If you don't like it I don't care a shred of bran."

"Come! come!" fussed Bambilio, "answer the interrogatories properly."

"I have and I shall," Brinnaria maintained mutinously.

"Are you fit in mind and in faculties to be a Vestal?" he continued.

"Fit to be Flaminica or Empress," Brinnaria responded.

"Are you pure?" came the next query.

"As when I was born," said Brinnaria emphatically.

"What is your age?" the Pontifex queried.

"I'll be ten on the Ides of next September," quoth his victim.

"Are your parents both alive?" he asked.

"They were the last time I heard of them," spoke Brinnaria flippantly.

"When was that?" he insisted.

"This is the twelfth day since they left Rome," said Brinnaria, "and I've not heard from them since they sent a messenger back from the ninth mile-stone on the road to Tibur."

Faltonius was irritating her more and more, and she added:

"They may both be dead by this time, for all I know."

"This will not do," spoke Faltonius. "We must be sure that they are both alive."

"Find out," snapped Brinnaria.

Up spoke young Calvaster, his pasty face alight with a sort of malicious glee.

"I passed Quartilla's travelling carriage at Varia last night. Quartilla was alive and well. I passed

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Brinnarius this morning at dawn, this side of Tibur. He was alive then and puffing."

"How did you get here ahead of him?" Brinnaria interjected.

"I am light built," Calvaster explained with obvious relish, "and I rode the best horse in Italy. His mount labored heavily under his load."

"Both parents are then alive," spoke Faltonius. "I hereupon and hereby pronounce you in all respects fit to be taken as a Vestal. Are you willing?"

"Not I!" Brinnaria fairly shouted.

"Not willing!" Faltonius cried, incredulous.

"Not a fibre of me!" she proclaimed emphatically.

"Wretched girl!" expostulated the Pontiff. "Have you no sense of patriotism? Do you not realize your duty to your country, to the Roman people, to Rome, to the Emperor, to all of us, to the commonwealth? Do you not realize Rome's need of you? Shall it be said that Rome has need of one of her daughters and that her unnatural child refuses?"

"I have not refused," said Brinnaria. "I only said I was unwilling."

"It is the same thing," declared the bewildered ecclesiastic.

"Not a bit the same thing," Brinnaria disclaimed. "I know my duty in this matter perfectly. Castor be good to me, I know it too well. I know that a refusal would avail me nothing, if I did refuse. I have not refused. I would not, even if I could escape by refusal. I realize my duty. If I am taken I shall be all that a Vestal is expected to be, all that she must be to ensure the glory and prosperity and safety of the city and the Empire. I shall not fail the Emperor nor the Roman people, nor Rome. But I am unwilling, and I

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said so. Little good it will do me. But I am no liar, not even in the tightest place."

"Stand up, my daughter," said Faltonius, rising himself, suddenly clothed in dignity, a really impressive figure, in spite of his globular proportions.

Brinnaria stood, her eyes on the door to the vestibule, her face very pale, trembling a little, but controlled.

The Pontifex took her hand and spoke:

"As priestess of Vesta, to perform those rites which it is fitting that a priestess of Vesta perform for the Roman People and the citizens, as a girl who has been chosen properly, so I take you, Beloved."

At the word "Beloved," which made her irretrievably a Vestal, Brinnaria could not repress a little gasp. Her eyes no longer watched the vestibule door. She looked at the Pontiff. He let go her hand.

"You will now go with your servitor to be clothed as befits your calling."

He indicated one of Causidiena's attendants, a solidly built woman, like a Tuscan villager, who carried over her arm a mass of fresh white garments and robes.

With her and Causidiena Brinnaria left the atrium; with them she presently returned, a slim white figure, her hair braided and the six braids wound round her forehead like a coronet, above them the folds of the plain square headdress of the Vestals.

"I thought," she said, "that my hair would be cut off."

"That will be after you are made at home in the Atrium of Vesta," spoke the Pontiff.

"And remember," he continued sternly, "that you are now a Vestal and that young Vestals may not speak unless spoken to."

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Brinnaria bit her lip.

At that moment they heard hoofs and voices outside, the door burst open and Brinnarius entered.

"Too late, Daddy!" cried Brinnaria. "You can't help me now. I'm not your little girl any more; I don't count as your daughter; you don't count as my father; I'm daughter to the Pontifex from now on. I'm a Vestal."

She was trembling, but she kept her countenance. Brinnarius uttered no sound, the whole gathering was still and mute, the noises of the street outside were plainly audible. They heard horse-hoofs again, again the door flew open wide. In burst Almo, wide-eyed and panting.

At him Brinnaria launched a sort of shriek of expostulation.

"Why couldn't you ride! You call yourself a horseman! And you've come too late! I mustn't even kiss you good-bye. And I mustn't speak to you, I mustn't see you, I mustn't so much as think of you for thirty years, for thirty years, *for thirty years*!"

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CHAPTER V

ESCAPADES

WHEN Brinnaria found herself actually domiciled in the House of the Vestals she experienced an odd mingling of awe and elation. The mere size of it was impressive, for it was nearly two hundred feet wide and almost four hundred feet long. Also it stood alone, bounded by four streets. Besides, it gained much dignity from its location, near the southeast corner of the great Forum of Rome, that most famous of all city squares, and under the very shadow of the Imperial Palace, the walls of which towered nearly three hundred feet above it, where it crouched as it were, on a site scooped out of the huge flank of the Palatine Hill.

Completely as it was dominated by the enormous bulk of the Palace it yet looked very large, having three lofty stories. Inside it was both spacious and stately. Brinnaria was habituated to space and stateliness, for her father's house had both, yet the Atrium of Vesta, as the House of the Vestals was officially denominated, impressed her as vast and splendid. That this immense and magnificent building was to be her home gave her sense of her own importance that thrilled her through and through. Its numerous retinue of deft and obsequious maid-servants added to this impression. Brinnaria's personal attendants, entirely at her beck and call and serving her alone, made up a considerable retinue by themselves. She found herself, like each of

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the other Vestals, served by a special waitress at table, by a waitress who had nothing to do but look after her wants. Then she had a sort of maid-of-honor, who had no duties except to act as companion, make herself agreeable, read aloud, if requested, accompany her on her outings and help to pass her leisure pleasantly. As she was a mere child in years she had a sort of governess to instruct her in all those subjects in which a Roman girl of good family was generally given lessons: correct reading; a smattering of mathematics, about equivalent to the simple arithmetic of our days; some knowledge of literature; a steady and efficient drill in reading and talking Greek; instrumental music, similar to the guitar-playing of modern times, and embroidery. She had a personal maid to bathe her, arrange her hair and otherwise make her comfortable; also a special maid to attend to her private apartment, which included what we would call a sitting-room, a tiny bedroom, and a large bath-room. The largest room was used mostly as a school-room for lessons with her instructress. Outside the Atrium Brinnaria had her private stable, her carriages, her coachman and ostlers, and her lictor, the red-cloaked runner, who preceded her carriage, announced its coming and cleared the way for it through the crowds of foot-passengers who thronged the streets of Rome.

Life in the Atrium was austere and formal, but in no respect ascetic. The austerities extended only to attire and behavior. The decorations of the courtyard, of the corridors and stairs, of the two hundred rooms, were bewilderingly varied and overpoweringly gorgeous. Every appointment of the Atrium was luxurious to the last degree; the furnishings were beautiful and precious, every object a work of art; the bath-

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rooms cunningly devised for comfort, the beds deep and soft, scarcely less so the sofas on which the Vestals reclined at their meals, the table service of exquisite glass-ware and elaborately chased silver, the food abundant and including every delicacy and rarity most appetizing and enjoyable.

Except Meffia her co-Vestals were immediately liked and speedily loved by Brinnaria. Meffia, a month older than herself and looking six years younger, was a small, awkward, ungainly girl, with pale blue eyes, pale yellow hair and babyish pink complexion. She had never had an ill hour in her life, yet she always appeared ailing, shrank from any effort, hated exercise and exertion and at every necessity for movement asserted that she was tired; often that she felt weak. Brinnaria thought her merely innately lazy and a natural shirk. The more she saw of her the more her loathing for her and her hatred of her intensified.

Quite the reverse with the others. Manlia was a large young woman of about twenty-two, a typical Roman aristocrat, her hair between dark brown and black, her complexion swarthy, her figure abundant. Gargilia was older than Manlia; a tall, slender creature with intensely black hair and piercing black eyes that looked straight at you out of a face healthfully tinted indeed, but of a whiteness which was the envy of half the beauties in Rome. Numisia Maximilla was much like an older Manlia, but sparer and of markedly haughty bearing and carriage. Causidiena, newly become Chief Vestal, was a woman of about forty-five years of age, mild, gentle, and charming, with cool gray eyes and glossy brown hair, a being who aroused affection, inspired admiration and compelled love from all her household.

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She won Brinnaria's heart at once by telling her that she herself, when she had first entered the Atrium of Vesta, had found it difficult to learn the etiquette of the order, had wanted to shout and sing and laugh out loud, to run up and down stairs instead of walking, to skip and jump.

That Causidiena had triumphed over similar tendencies comforted Brinnaria and helped her to try to overcome her own. Most difficult to curb was her tendency to be rude to Meffia. This Causidiena noticed at once and set herself to obliterate. Brinnaria unbosomed herself and Causidiena listened so sympathetically that Brinnaria sat silent through the long lecture that followed and was very submissive during a searching interrogatory. She promised to comport herself as a Vestal should.

"But," she said, "I shall suffer. That girl is unpleasant in ten thousand ways, but the smell of her is the most unpleasant thing about her. She's been tubbed and scrubbed and massaged and perfumed twice a day ever since I came here and she smells worse than a polecat, anyhow, all day long, even the moment after her maid has finished her toilet. A whiff of Meffia sets me frantic. I'd be capable of any crime to get rid of her."

More lecturing followed.

"But it's true!" Brinnaria maintained. "You can't help smelling her yourself; she smells like nothing else on earth. It isn't the smell of a dirty girl or of an ill girl, nor the smell of a girl at all or of any kind of a human being. I can't describe it, but it's a thin sour smell, sharp and shrill like the note of a cricket, if a sound and a smell can be compared. It's horrible; it's not human."

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More lecturing, a long session of lecturing, followed this outburst. At the end of it the victim was meek and pliable, or so professed herself.

For at least five days Brinnaria kept up her effort to be comradely with Meffia. By the sixth day she was completely exhausted and the two avoided each other as before.

Agonies indeed Brinnaria suffered in her efforts to live up to Causidiena's ideas of what she should be. On the whole she succeeded pretty well and committed few errors of deportment. Outwardly she controlled herself from the first; for, before her first cowed sensations had worn off, her adoration of Causidiena had gained full sway over her. Yet inwardly she suffered more and more acutely as time went on, partly feeling that she must burst out in spite of herself, partly dreading that she would.

At last, after many days, she perpetrated her first and most undignified prank. It was a terrific occurrence, judged by the standards of the Atrium.

The great peristyle of the House of the Vestals, including nearly three-fourths of the whole courtyard, was beautified with a splendid double colonnade, two tiers of pillars, one above the other, the lower of delicately mottled Carystian marble wavily veined with green streaks varying its whiteness, the upper of coral-red brecchia. Midway of the court was a tank lined with marbles and always filled with clear water.

One morning Meffia, walking about the court, in her irritatingly aimless fashion, passed between Brinnaria and the edge of the tank. There was no earthly reason for her so doing, as Brinnaria was barely a yard from the margin of the pool, and on the other side of Brin-

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naria was the ample expanse of the pavement of the spacious court.

Brinnaria was exasperated by Meffia's proximity, by her lackadaisical manner, by her shambling gait, by her sleep-walking attitude, most of all by the peculiar thin, sour odor which Meffia exhaled. At the sight of Meffia's elaborately disagreeable demeanor of isolation, all Brinnaria's natural self began to boil in her; at the whiff which assailed her nostrils she boiled over, all her uncurbed instincts surging up at once. She put out one foot and gave Meffia a push.

Meffia, with a squall and a great splash, fell into the tank.

She not only fell in, but she went under the water.

She went under and did not come up.

For an instant Brinnaria thought she was shamming to scare her; but, in a twinkling she realized that Meffia had fainted.

Promptly she plunged in and rescued her victim.

Numisia, hurrying to the sound of Meffia's squawk, was horrified at the sight of a dripping Vestal toiling up the steps of the tank carrying over her shoulder another Vestal, equally dripping and limp as a meal-sack, her arms and legs trailing horribly.

Agitation at Meffia's prolonged insensibility postponed inquiry as to how she came to fall into the tank. It so happened that Causidiena first questioned some of the maid-servants, who all hated Meffia and liked Brinnaria. Therefore the ones interrogated told a story as much at variance with the facts as they saw fit.

Brinnaria, after she was again dry-clad, quaked inwardly in anticipation of Causidiena's wrath and suffered a good deal more at the thought of her pained,

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silent displeasure. Hours passed, long hours passed and nothing was said on the subject. From none of her sister Vestals did she hear a word of reproach, not one of them behaved towards her any differently from what was usual.

Finally one of the maids enlightened Brinnaria. Promptly she sought a private audience with Causidiena. First she made sure that none of the maids would suffer for their duplicity and partiality; then she confessed.

The Chief Vestal was not wrathful, not even stern. She talked mildly and gently, yet made Brinnaria feel very much ashamed of herself and acutely penitent.

The end of the interview was that Causidiena said:

"You are such a robust child that you do not realize how frail Meffia is. She is perfectly healthy, but is very easily unnerved or exhausted. You have given her such a shock that she is unfit for duty. Any Vestal is allowed to be ill for two nights and one day, if the trouble seems trifling. But, if any Vestal is ill for a longer time, she is promptly removed from the Atrium for nursing. I fear that Meffia may not recover within the permitted time. I am most anxious that there should be as few as possible cases of recorded illness in the Atrium under my management. As you have caused the situation you must help me to avoid what I fear. Go to Meffia and nurse her out of this and get her about to-morrow morning."

"Castor be good to me!" Brinnaria cried. "Smell that girl for a day and a night! Whew! Pretty severe punishment! But I deserve that and worse. And I'll do anything for you, Causidiena."

Meffia hated Brinnaria cordially, yet she found her a deft, tactful and silent nurse. But the very sight of

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Brinnaria was to her an irritant tonic. She was entirely fit for duty the next day, not a trace of slackness, unwillingness or sullenness.

Causidiena early made up her mind that Brinnaria's intentions were good and that she was far from planning her outbursts. She had herself no prevision of what was coming, not an inkling of what was about to happen—she blurted out her shocking remarks without herself knowing what she was going to say and was overwhelmed with confusion when her own ears heard the totally unexpected words which she had uttered; she contemplated aghast the havoc she had wrought. Generally she made a pretty fair attempt at demeaning herself as a Vestal should; but, every once in a while, without warning, something of her old wild self surged up in her and the speech was spoken or the action completed before she realized she was about to speak or act at all.

One such freak gave her a sort of notoriety, brought her name to the lips of every gossip in Rome.

She was as pleased with her privileges as a normal child of her age with a set of new toys, as warily insistent on them as any aristocrat of her build and appearance.

She learned the precise nature and extent of her prerogatives and did her utmost to enjoy them all. Being an adept at accounts she ascertained the character of the various estates and investments that went to make up the great property which was her jointure as a Vestal, made sure of the exact income from each of its components, also the total amount; both how far she was allowed to have her way in spending it and how soon she would be free of supervision in that respect. She made her will before she had been a Vestal for a

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month, leaving all her property to Almo, should she die before him; but the whole to the order of Vestals if he died before her.

Of all her privileges the one she enjoyed most was the right to drive where she pleased through the city in her private carriage, with her lictor running ahead and clearing the way for it. Carriage-driving within the city limits was restricted in Rome by severe regulations rigorously enforced. Ordinary travelling carriages might use only the great main thoroughfares leading to the city gates. The owner of one, unless he happened to live on one of those chief arteries of the traffic, might not step from his house door into his carriage but must have it halted at some point on the permitted avenues and must reach it on foot or by litter. But there was no street or alley in Rome wide enough for a carriage which a Vestal might not drive through; a Vestal might drive anywhere. Brinnaria was first taken out driving by Causidiena and Numisia, then by the others in succession. Driving with Meffia was no pleasure to her, but it was the etiquette of the order that each Vestal in turn should offer the courtesy of her carriage to a new member of the sisterhood.

After that formality had been complied with Brinnaria was permitted to drive where she pleased, with what guest she chose, or accompanied only by her official companion or by her maid. Systematically she drove everywhere, once alone with her maid, once with each of the other Vestals, often with her mother, often with Flexinna. It gave her great pleasure to drive up the long zigzag approach to the Capitol, where no human being save the Vestals and the Empress might be driven, and where few Empresses had ever ventured to drive, to have her carriage halted before the great

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Temple of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, where no carriage except the carriages of the Vestals had been seen for more than a hundred years, to enter the temple and say her prayers. It gave her even more pleasure to take her mother or Flexinna with her, as was her privilege; to make them sharers in her right to be driven to Rome's chief temple, to which all other Romans, even the Emperors, must walk or be carried by litter-bearers.

She discovered another privilege of her position. Roman women of the better classes never went out of doors alone. On the streets a lady, if not companioned by one or more equals was always accompanied by a maid-servant. This had been the custom from time immemorial and had come to have the force of a moral law. The sight of a woman of wealth and position entirely alone in her carriage would have been startling, to see a lady in her litter without a maid walking behind the bearers would have been shocking: the spectacle of a lady alone on foot would have given scandal.

But, by some survival of the simplicity of the manners in those primitive days in which the order originated, the Vestals were exceptions to this mandatory fashion. A Vestal might never go abroad on foot, except in one of the solemn processions. But, in her litter or her carriage, she might go anywhere in Rome unaccompanied, protected only by her lictor and her bearers or coachman. This privilege, like many others, marked the Vestals as being apart from and exalted above the rest of woman-kind.

As soon as Brinnaria learned that she possessed this right she proceeded to exercise it. Though she felt lonesome when driving alone and enjoyed her outing far more when she had a companion, yet she drove alone day after day, merely because it was her prerogative.

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So driving she had, in one day, two thrilling experiences. She had told her coachman to drive where he pleased and hardly noticed where she was being driven.

Suddenly turning from a side street into one of the main thoroughfares of the city, she encountered the co-Emperor Lucius Verus with his official escort. It was during the busy days preceding his departure for Antioch and his great campaign against the Parthians. Verus, roused from his devotion to sport and pleasure, was feverish with enthusiasm and full of mercurial energy. He bustled in and out of Rome, inspecting camps, presiding at ceremonials and keeping everything in a ferment.

That day he was returning from an inspection amid a large and gorgeous retinue. Brinnaria had a blurred vision of splendid uniforms and dazzling accoutrements. Her vision was blurred because her eyes filled with tears; she turned hot and cold and almost fainted with emotion, when the Emperor's twenty-four lictors lowered their fasces, the whole procession halted, the escort and the Emperor himself swerved their horses aside to let her pass and remained at the salute until she had passed. The sudden realization of the importance of her official position overwhelmed her.

As she drove on, when she recovered herself, she meditated on the experience, and told herself that she must live up to her exalted station, that she must never, never, never for such as one instant, forget herself or behave otherwise than as became a Vestal.

On the very same drive, before she returned to the Atrium, she completely forgot herself.

It was a hot, sultry afternoon and it suited her coachman to drive homeward along the Subura, that thronged and unsavory Bowery of ancient Rome. Three

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street urchins were teasing and maltreating a rough-coated, muddy little cur. Brinnaria called imperiously to her lictor to interfere. He was too far ahead to hear her. Her coachman had all he could do to control her mettlesome span of Spanish mares. She spoke to the boys and they laughed at her. Before she knew it she had flung open her carriage door, had leapt out, had cuffed soundly the ears of the three dumbfounded gamins, and was back among her cushions, the dog in her arms.

This escapade brought upon her a visit from the Pontifex of Vesta, the semi-globular Faltonius Bambilio, diffusing pomposity. From him she had to listen to a long lecture on deportment and to a reading of the minutes of the meeting of the College of Pontiffs which had discussed her public misbehavior.

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CHAPTER VI

NOTORIETY

WITHIN a month she did far worse. She perpetrated, in fact, a deed with the fame of which not only the city, but the Empire rang; made herself notorious everywhere.

It was on the occasion of her introductory visit to the Colosseum when, for the first time, she was a spectator at an exhibition of fighting gladiators. She was in a high-strung state of elation and anticipation. Going to the Amphitheatre, in itself, was a soul-stirring experience. Meffia, to Brinnaria's joy, had been on duty that day, along with Numisia. This alone was enough to put Brinnaria in a good humor. Meffia's presence spoiled for her any sort of pleasure. Then, besides, they drove to the Colosseum, not in their light carriages, but two by two in their gorgeous state coaches, huge vehicles, of which the woodwork was elaborately carved and heavily gilded and whose cushions and curtains were all of that splendid official color, the imperial purple. The name conveys to us a false impression, for the hue known then as imperial purple was not what we should call a purple, but a deep, dark crimson, like the tint of claret in a goblet.

Against a background of this magnificent color, the Vestals, habited all in white, showed conspicuously. Their stately progress through the streets, gazed at and pointed at by the admiring crowds, was conducive

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to high spirits. Still more so was it to be ushered obsequiously through cool corridors and up carpeted stairs to the Vestals' private loge, a roomy space immediately to the right of the imperial pavilion. To be inside the Colosseum at last set her eyes dancing and her heart thumping; the anticipation of actually viewing the countless fights of many hundreds of gladiators increased her excitement; to be seated in front seats, with nothing but the carved stone coping between her and the arena was most exhilarating of all. She was delighted with her great, carved arm-chair, deeply cushioned and so heavy that it was as firm on its solid oak legs as if bolted to the stone floor. She settled herself in it luxuriously, gazed across the smooth yellow sand, glanced up at the gay, parti-colored awning, and then conned the vast audience, line after line of rose-crowned heads rising tier above tier all about her.

She scanned the faces in the front row to left and right as far as she could make them out clearly. She peered across the open space of the arena, puckering her eyes to see better. When she caught sight of what she was looking for she turned timidly, leaned past Manlia and asked Causidiena:

"May I wave my hand to mother?"

"Certainly, my child," Causidiena assured her.

Brinnaria waved her little hand and was seen, and felt the thrill of a general family handwaving in reply.

Suddenly she experienced a qualm of bashfulness, as if every one in the enormous gathering were looking at her, watching her. She cast down her eyes, wrapped her white robe close about her, hiding her hands under it, and shrank into her arm-chair. For a while, for a long while, she fanned herself nervously, very slowly, and striving to appear calm. Gradually she became

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calm and laughed to herself at her own folly, realizing that nobody was noticing her.

Nobody noticed her. Many spectators noticed the Vestals, but no one noticed her individually. This she realized acutely before the day was over.

At about the time when she began to feel herself at ease the entrance of the Emperor and his suite distracted her attention from herself. When the trumpet blew, announcing the approach of the Imperial party, a hush fell on the vast audience and all eyes turned towards the grand pavilion. When the trumpet blew the second time, just before the Emperor came in sight, the hush deepened and the spectators watched intently. When his head appeared as he mounted the stairs the audience burst into the short, sharply staccato song of welcome, something like a tuneful, sing-song college yell, with which Roman crowds greeted their master. This vocal salute, a mere tag of eight or nine syllables, each with its distinctive note, was repeated over and over until the Emperor was seated.

Then the audience settled themselves into their seats. Brinnaria had instinctively started to rise when she caught sight of the Emperor. Manlia had put out a restraining hand. The Vestals, alone of all Romans, remained seated in the presence of the Emperor, not even rising when he appeared.

Marcus Aurelius was a tall, spare man of over forty years of age, with abundant hair curling in long ringlets over his chest and shoulders, and a full beard mingling with the carefully disposed curls. He was a serious-faced man, careworn and solemn.

Brinnaria regarded him with interest. She had never seen him so close and she felt a sudden fellow-feeling for him from the sense of semi-equality with him that flooded

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through her at having remained seated. She recalled vividly the half-dozen times she had watched from balconies the passage of processions in which the Emperor took part, how her mother had made her stand up the moment he came in sight and had kept her standing until he was far away. Her sudden exaltation in social position was borne in upon her with startling emphasis. Not even her carriage rides had impressed her so tellingly with the sensation of her own importance in the great world of Imperial Rome.

"How does he look to you?" Manlia asked. They were seated in the order of their seniority, Causidiena on the right, then Gargilia, Manlia next Brinnaria.

"He looks crushed under his responsibilities and anxieties," Brinnaria replied. "He looks depressed, even sad."

"He is all that, poor man," her neighbor agreed, "and no wonder in these days. The Parthians are at us on the east, the Germans in the north, and there have been more than twelve deaths in the palace each day for twenty consecutive days now. This pestilence is enough to make anybody sad."

"More than that," Brinnaria countered. "He looks irritated and bored. Everybody else is alert and keyed up with anticipation. His eyes are dull and he looks as if he wished that the show was over and he could go home."

"You have read him right," Manlia told her. "He detests all kinds of spectacles, takes no interest in races and hates beast-fights. Most of all he loathes gladiatorial combats. Father has told me about it more than once and Causidiena says the same thing. I can't understand it. I never get tired of sword-fighting, myself. What I like about it is its endless variety. I never

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saw any two fights exactly alike, never saw two closely alike. Each fight is a spectacle by itself, entirely different from any other. I don't mean the difference between the fighters in respect to their equipment and appearance, though that contributes to the variety also; I mean the difference in posture, method of defense and attack, style of lunge and parry, and all that; and the countless variations in form in the men, the subtle differences of character which makes them face similar situations so very differently. You'll get the feeling for it in a half a dozen shows and be as keen on it as the rest of us.

"But the Emperor is different. Perhaps it's because he is such a booky man and spends so much time in reading and study. But I think not. There never was anybody more of a bookworm than Numisia and she is as wild over the shows as any street-boy in Rome. Anyhow, whatever the cause is, that is the way he is. He was more than surfeited with shows before he was Emperor. While he was nothing but a boy, soon after he was adopted and made Cæsar, he often had to preside in the Circus or here, when Hadrian was away travelling and Antonius and Verus were on the frontiers. He used to bring his tutors with him and have two of them sit on each side of him a little behind him. Then, after the shows had started, he would put a tablet on his knee and write a theme or work out a problem in geometry and when he had finished it, would pass it to one of his tutors for comment, or he would have them make out sets of questions on history or something else and he would write out the answers the best he could. Sometimes he would read. All this he did as calmly as if he were alone in a closed room with nothing to call off his attention. Yet he was most careful to seem to watch

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the shows and would look up every little while and gaze about the arena. But nothing ever distracted him from his lessons. That is the kind he is. He simply never cared for this sort of thing. He says that what oppresses him is the maddening monotony of gladiatorial shows. Fancy anybody thinking sword-fighting monotonous! But he does. He says every combat is just like every other. All he sees in a fight is two men facing each other and one being killed. He gets no thrills from the uncertainties of the outcome, no pleasure from the dexterity and skill of the fighters. To him it's just butchery, and the same kind of butchery over and over. He says he might get some enjoyment out of a show if something novel would happen, something he never saw before, something unexpected. But nothing ever does."

Brinnaria regarded curiously this grave, earnest man, who derived so little pleasure from the most coveted position on earth. She continued to watch him until everybody turned to the procession around the arena of all who were to fight that day, the invariable preliminary of a gladiatorial show and always a splendid spectacle.

When the fights began Brinnaria felt at first an unexpected tightening of the chest, as if a band were being drawn tight just under her armpits. Her breath came short and hard and her heart thumped her ribs.

The first sight of blood made her feel faint and the horrible contortions just below her of a dying man, who writhed in strong convulsions like a fish out of water, made her qualmish and sick.

But all that soon passed off. She was a Roman and the Romans were professional killers, had been professional killers for a thousand years. Success in hand to hand combat with any individual foe was every male

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Roman's ideal of the crowning glory of human life; the thought of it was in every Roman's mind from early childhood, every act of life was a preparation for it. Their wives and sisters shared their enthusiasm for fighting and their daughters inherited the instinct. Combat on the field of battle was felt as the chief business of a man, to which all other activities merely led up. By reflected light, as it were, every kind of combat acquired a glamour in the thoughts of a Roman. The idea of men killing men, of men being killed by men, was familiar to all Romans, of whatever sex or age. Brinnaria was not affected as a modern girl would be by the sight of blood or of death. The novelty revolted her at first, but only briefly. Soon she was absorbed in the interest of the fighting.

Almost at once her eye was caught by a young and handsome fighter who reminded her strongly of Almo.

His adversary was that kind of gladiator known technically as a secutor, a burly ruffian in complete armor, with huge shin-guards like jack-boots, a kilt of broad leather straps hanging in two overlapping rows, the upper set plated with bronze scales, a bronze corselet, and, fitting closely to his shoulders, covering head and neck together, a great, heavy helmet. He carried a large shield, squarish in shape, but curving to fit him as if he were hiding behind a section of the outer bark of a big tree. He was armed with a keen, straight-bladed Spanish sword.

Facing this portentous tower of metal was a gladiator of the sort known as a retiarius, equipped solely with a long-handled, slender-shafted trident, like a fisherman's eel-spear, and a voluminous, wide-meshed net of thin cord. His only clothing was a scanty body-piece of bright blue. His feet were small with high-arched

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insteps. Brinnaria particularly noticed his perfectly shaped toes. His bare legs, body and arms were in every proportion the perfection of form, the supple muscles rippling exquisitely under his warm tanned skin. His face was almost beautiful, with a round chin, thin curled lips, a straight nose, and a wide brow. Its expression was lively, even merry, almost roguish, his lips parted in an alert smile, his blue eyes sparkling. He seemed to enjoy the game in which he was engaged, to be brimming over with self-confidence, to anticipate success, to relish his foretaste of combat with a sort of impish delight.

Roman children heard as much talk of gladiators as modern children hear of baseball or cricket. Brinnaria knew perfectly well that the betting on a set-to between such a pair was customarily five to three against the secutor and on the retiarius. Yet she felt the sensation usual with onlookers in such a case, the sensation purposed by the device of pairing men so differently equipped, the sensation that the mailed secutor was invincible and the naked retiarius helpless against him. She was keyed up with interest.

In fact the combat was interesting. The secutor, of course, could have disposed of his antagonist in a trice, if he had only been able to reach him. But a clumsy, heavy secutor never could reach a nimble, agile retiarius. The one Brinnaria was watching was more than usually light-footed and skipped about his adversary in a taunting, teasing way. Again and again he cast his net intentionally too short, merely to show how easily he could recover it and escape his opponent's onset. He danced, capered, pretended to be lame and that he could not avoid being overtaken, led his pursuer on, out-manœuvred him, derided him; twice he lunged

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through the flapping straps of his kilt and grazed his thigh. The secutor was barely scratched, but his blood trickled down his shin-guard and he was limping.

Then, all in a flash, the retiarius pirouetted too rashly, slipped on the sand, fell sprawling, failed to rise in time, and was slashed deeply all down one calf. He rolled over in a last effort to escape, but the secutor kicked him in the ribs and, before he could recover, sent the trident spinning with a second kick and set his foot upon his victim's neck. So standing he rolled his eyes over that part of the audience nearest him to discover whether it was the pleasure of the lookers-on that the defeated man should be killed or spared.

Now it so happened that nearly all the spectators in that part of the audience were watching a far more exciting contest farther out in the arena, where two Indian elephants, each manned by a crew of five picked men, were clashing in a terrific struggle. No one, except Brinnaria, had any eyes for the plight of the young retiarius below them. The secutor beheld indifferent faces gazing over his head. The few thumbs he could see pointed skyward. Brinnaria, to be sure, was holding out her right arm, thumb down, and doing her best to attract the secutor's attention. She failed. He glanced, indeed, at the Vestals, but as three of them sat impassive he missed Brinnaria's imperious gesture.

He prepared to put his foe to death. First, however, he looked further along the front rows to make sure that he had the permission of the general audience, since the occupants of the Imperial box and of the Vestals loge seemed to ignore him.

Brinnaria perceived that he would probably not look again in her direction; that as soon as his roving eyes

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came back from their unhurried survey of the audience, he would deliver the fatal blow.

She quickly knotted the corner of her robe to the arm of her chair, squirmed out of it, and threw it over the parapet. The robe of a Roman lady was sleeveless and seamless, rather like a very long pair of very thin blankets, all in one piece. Tied, as she had tied it, by one corner, it made a sort of rope as it hung. She had acted so quickly that no one noticed her, not even Manlia, who sat next her, staring fascinatedly at the spectacle of the wrestling elephants and their warring crews.

Grasping her robe firmly with both hands, escaping by a hair's-breadth the despairing clutch of the horrified Manlia, Brinnaria half vaulted, half rolled over the parapet, swung sailor-fashion to the rope her robe formed, went down it, hand over hand, raced across the sand and faced the victorious secutor.

He, although a foreigner and a savage, had been long enough in Rome to know perfectly what a Vestal was and he recoiled from her in a panic no less than he would have felt had the goddess Vesta herself come down from the sky to balk him of his prey.

The next instant no one was regarding the death-struggle of the elephants, nor any other of the scores of fights ended, ending, under way or just begun. Every human being in the audience was staring at the amazing spectacle of a Vestal virgin, clad only in her thin, clinging tunic, standing over a fallen retiarius and facing an appalled and dumbfounded secutor.

The place fell very still. So still that the shrill voice of a street-gamin, a boy from the Via Sacra, was audible throughout the vast enclosure from gallery to gallery. He yelled in his cutting falsetto:

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"Good for you, Sis!"

But his neighbors silenced him at once and not even any other ragamuffin lifted his voice. The audience were startled mute. They were quite ready to applaud the girl's daring, but the shocking impropriety of her breach of decorum struck them dumb.

The Emperor, roused from his meditations by the sudden hush, looked about him for the cause of it and saw the situation. He leaned forward, arm out, thumb pointing earthward. The secutor sheathed his sword.

Manlia, with great presence of mind, untied the dangling robe and dropped it over the parapet. One of the arena attendants carried it to Brinnaria and she put it on. But she would not stir and stood straddling the fallen lad until one of the Emperor's aides came out of one of the low doors in the arena-wall, crossed to her and assured her that the defeated retiarius would be spared and cared for. Then she suffered herself to be led back to her seat, by way of the door in the wall and passages and stairs never meant for any Vestal to tread.

Not until they saw Brinnaria move off in charge of the staff-officer did the audience let loose their pent-up feelings. The place pulsated with a roar like that of a great waterfall in a deep gorge, salvo after salvo of cheers swelling and merging. The deep boom of their applause pursued Brinnaria and made her cower. The people would never forget her now. They were in ecstasy. She was their darling.

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CHAPTER VII

AUDIENCE

ON the drive homeward from that unforgettable gladiatorial exhibition Manlia and Gargilia shared the second state coach: in the first sat Brinnaria by Causidiena.

"My child," Causidiena queried, "what ever made you do it?"

"I don't know," Brinnaria replied. "I did it before I thought."

"Well!" said her elder philosophically. "It is done now and cannot be helped. But please try to remember that a Vestal is expected to control herself at all times, never to act without forethought, to reflect long before she acts, to do nothing unusual, to be very sure in each instance that what she is about to do is wholly becoming to a Vestal."

"I'll keep on trying," Brinnaria replied mutinously, "but I was not constructed to be a Vestal. I always knew it; I know it now and I am afraid I'll continue my blundering through the conventions. I'm built that way."

She had to endure a second long lecture from Faltonius Bambilio. She listened submissively enough, but vouchsafed not one word of self-defence, rejoinder or comment; and, when urged to speak, she was obstinately silent.

"My daughter," Faltonius droned at her, "remember

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that, since your entrance into the order of Vestals, I stand to you in the relation of parent to his own child. You should confide in me as in your spiritual father."

"I should do nothing of the kind," Brinnaria refuted him. "I know the statutes of the order better than that. Up to the days of the Divine Augustus, the Pontifex Maximus inhabited the house next to the house of the Vestals and stood in the closest relation of fatherhood towards them. But since he went to live on the Palatine and made us a present of his house we have occupied all this Atrium which was built in the place of the two houses. Since then no one has been in the same intimate relation of control over us. The Emperors have always held the office of Pontifex Maximus and as such each Emperor has been the spiritual father of the Vestals. The Emperor is my spiritual father and you are not."

"Your self-opinionated talk does you little credit," Faltonius retorted. "Since you know so much you must know also that for many years each Emperor has designated some priest as Pontifex of Vesta to be his deputy and to stand in the closest relation of parental oversight towards the members of your consecrated order; I am that deputy."

"I have no desire to confide in a deputy," Brinnaria told him, "or to consider the deputy as my real spiritual father. If I feel inclined to confide I'll make my confidences to my genuine spiritual father, not to his understrapper."

Bambilio was piqued and spoke sourly.

"The Emperor," he said, "will be far from pleased with my report of you."

"It will make no difference to me or to him what you report or whether you make any report or not," spoke

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Brinnaria. "I'm going to have a talk with him myself."

"Doubtless," Bambilio meditated. "He has sent for you to rebuke you."

"He has done nothing of the kind," she retorted vigorously. "He has more sense. And if he had sent for me I should not have gone. I know my rights. If he wanted to talk to me, he'd have to come to me here. But as, in this case, I wanted to talk to him, I have asked for an audience and the day and the hour have been fixed. I am to have an audience to-morrow morning. And now, as I am to talk to him myself, I see no reason why I should spend more time being bored by his deputy. If you please, I should be obliged if you would terminate this interview."

Astounded and dumb, Faltonius bowed himself out.

Causidiena suggested that she accompany Brinnaria on her visit to the Palace.

"It would be lovely to have you with me," Brinnaria said, "and I am ever so grateful for your offer. You are a dear and I love you. I shall want you and wish for you all the way there, all the time I am there and all the way back. I shall be scared to death. But I must go alone. In the first place it is my right, if I were only six years old, to have audience with the Emperor alone whenever I ask for it and as often as I ask for it. I am not going to abate an iota of my rights merely for my own comfort. In the second place, I must go through this unhelped and unsupported all by myself. I know it; I must fight it out alone and come through alone. He'll be sympathetic, if I deserve it. If I don't deserve sympathy from him I don't deserve it from you, nor your company and your countenance, either."

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Scared Brinnaria was, but even through her worst qualms of panic she was uplifted by an elating sense of her own importance. Not her encounter with Verus and his retinue, not her having remained seated when Aurelius entered the Colosseum had so poignantly made her realize how exalted was a Vestal. She drove to the Palace alone, not in her light carriage, but in her huge state coach, feeling very small in her white robes amid all that crimson upholstery, but also feeling herself a very great personage.

Her reception at the Palace made her feel even more so. The magnificence of the courtyard in which her coach came to a standstill, the ceremonial of turning out the guard in her honor, the formality with which she was conducted from corridor to corridor and from hall to hall, the immensity and gorgeousness of the vast audience hall in which she was finally left alone with the Emperor; all these did not so much overwhelm her as exalt her. She felt herself indeed a princess.

The Emperor greeted Brinnaria kindly, was as sympathetic as possible and put her at her ease at once. He soothed her, made her seat herself comfortably and said:

"Don't worry about what you have done. You are certainly the most startling Vestal since Gegania, but you have really done nothing actually wrong. So do not agitate yourself about what cannot be altered. The question which concerns me is, what will you do next?"

"I think," said Brinnaria, "that the next thing I shall do will be to procure a good strong rope and hang myself."

"My child," the shocked Emperor exclaimed, "you really should not speak so flippantly of so dreadful an idea!"

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"I'm not a particle flippant this time," Brinnaria declared. "I know I am often flippant, but not now, not a bit. I am just as serious as life and death. I have thought of nothing but suicide since Trebellius conducted me back to my seat. I can't get the idea out of my head and that is why I have come to you."

"Tell me all about it from the beginning," the Emperor said, comfortingly. "What put the notion into your head?"

"In the beginning," said Brinnaria, "you know that I didn't want to be a Vestal."

"Yes, I know," he assured her.

"Well," she went on, "now I am a Vestal and must serve out my thirty years, I'm really trying to do my best to be all I ought to be. I really am. I've tried hard to be sedate and grave and collected and reticent and slow-spoken, and all the rest of it. And I think I haven't done badly most of the time. But after all, I'm myself and I can't be changed. Every once in a while myself boils up in me under the scum of convention I've spread on top of the cauldron, so to speak. I don't mean to let go and be natural and spontaneous. I've done the awful thing before I know I'm going to do it. I didn't mean to pour the pork gravy over old Gubba's head; but she looked so funny I just did it without knowing what I was going to do. I didn't mean to throw Manlia's pet monkey out of the window on to Moccilo's head. But her shock of red curls looked to be just the place on which to drop little Dito, and I dropped Dito before I thought. It's just the same way about all the other dreadful things I do. I don't mean to do them, but I do do them."

"Don't worry," the Emperor said, "you'll outgrow all that."

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"I trust I may," Brinnaria sighed, "but how about the harm I'm doing as I go along?"

"You haven't done any harm, not any harm that matters," the Emperor soothed her.

"Are you perfectly sure of that?" she persisted. "If you could make me perfectly sure of that, I should feel a great deal better. Are you sure?"

"I can't see any real harm in your pranks," the Emperor said. "I certainly should not encourage you to continue or repeat such conduct or to revert to it, but I see no real harm in it."

"You think I have not unfitted myself for my duties?"

The Emperor meditated.

"To a certainty," he said, "if your conduct was intentional, if you thought up these pranks of yours and perpetrated them, with deliberate consciousness of what you were about to do, I should hold you gravely unfitted for your position. But you are manifestly sincere in your efforts to be all you ought to be and are trying genuinely to overcome your tendencies and to outgrow your coltishness. I am of the opinion that, if you curb yourself from now on, you have done no harm."

"Do you think," Brinnaria insisted, "that if you called a meeting of all the colleges of pontiffs and put the question to them, that they would make the same answer you have made?"

"You amazing child!" Aurelius exclaimed. "Why should you assume the attitude of advocate against yourself? Why suggest a synod to discuss your conduct and express an official opinion on it? Is not my opinion enough? Even if I saw fit to call a synod and all the members of it held the same views and expressed them never so cogently, do you not realize that, if my

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views were contrary to theirs, it would be my view that would prevail; that it would not only be my privilege and my right but my imperative duty to override any opposition and to enforce my decision? Are you not satisfied with the opinions of the man who is at once Emperor and Chief Pontifex of Rome?"

"But," Brinnaria persisted, "I am not at all sure that you are speaking as Emperor and Chief Pontifex. To me you seem to speak as a kindly husband and father very sympathetic towards another man's little daughter who comes to you in deep trouble of spirit."

"You amazing child!" the Emperor repeated. "You talk as if you were forty years old. Tell me precisely what is troubling you, for I must have failed to fathom it, and be sure I shall reply officially as Emperor and Pontifex."

"What troubles me," said Brinnaria, "is the dread that my wild and tom-boyish behavior may be as displeasing to the Goddess as coquettishness or wantonness. I am in terror for fear my ministrations may be unpleasant to her, may be sacrilegious, may not only fail to win her blessing upon Rome but may draw down her curse upon all of us. I never thought of that until I stood there all alone out in the arena, astraddle of that beautiful boy whom I just had to save, feeling all of a sudden horribly naked in my one thin, clinging undergarment, with two hundred thousand eyes staring at me. It came over me with a rush that I was not only never going to be fit for a Vestal but that I wasn't fit for a Vestal and I hadn't been fit for a Vestal; that I not only was going to do harm, not only was doing harm, but had done harm. If the Parthians are devastating the frontier along the Euphrates and the Marcommani and the Quadi are storming the outposts

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along the Danube and the Rhine, perhaps that is because my presence in the Atrium is an offence in the eyes of Vesta, my prayers an affront to my Goddess, my care of her altar-fire an insult to her. I tremble to think of it. And I cannot get it out of my head. I wake up in the dark and think of it and it keeps me awake, sometimes, longer than I ever lay awake in the dark in my life. It scares me. I am a Vestal to bring prosperity and glory to the Empire, to pray prayers that will surely be answered. Suppose the Goddess is deaf to my prayers because I am unworthy to pray to her? Suppose that my prayers infuriate her because I am vile in her sight? Suppose I am causing disaster to the Empire? I keep thinking all that. Do you wonder that I think of suicide, of hanging myself, like the two Oculatas?"

"My child!" Aurelius cut in. "You have not done anything that justifies your comparing yourself to the Oculata sisters."

"We'll come back to that later," Brinnaria replied. "Just now let us stick to the point. Do you think my fears justified or not?"

"Decidedly not," the Emperor rejoined, without an instant's hesitation, "and I speak not as a soft-hearted parent who sees the soul of his own daughter looking at him out of the eyes of every little girl whose heart troubles her, I speak as the guardian of the interests of the Empire, as the warder of the destinies of Rome.

"Your misbehavior has certainly been grave, I admit; and, if done maliciously, would entail all the harm you imagine. But the Goddess can see not only your actions but your thoughts. Your scruples do you high credit. I will not say you are as pleasing to the Goddess as would be a grave and sedate ministrant, but I do

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solemnly decide and declare that you need have no further dread of any past, present or future harm to the Empire or to Rome from your past behavior, if you honestly try to err no more. This is my official decision. Be at peace in your heart."

Brinnaria drew a deep breath.

"You certainly comfort me," she said, "but I just know I'll boil over again and not once, but many times."

"Vesta will comprehend," he said, "if your derelictions are less and less frequent and less and less violent; if you succeed a little better from month to month and from year to year. She will not be pleased with your lapses, if you lapse again, but she will be pleased at your struggles with yourself and with your good intentions. She will smile upon your ministrations and hearken to your petitions. Be comforted."

"I am," said Brinnaria, "as far as that trifle goes, but now we come to my real and chief concern. Suppose I am as detestable in the sight of my Goddess as the Oculata sisters were, and for a similar reason; suppose I ought to hang myself as dead as they hanged themselves? Oughtn't I, then, to hang myself?"

"You incredible creature!" Aurelius cried. "I've met women by the thousand, by the tens of thousands, but never a girl like you. What do you mean? What can you mean? You cannot mean what you seem to mean. Explain yourself. Be explicit. Tell me all about what is troubling you. I'll understand and put your mind at ease."

"I trust you may," Brinnaria sighed, "but I dread that you cannot. I mean just what I seem to mean."

"Impossible!" the Emperor cried, "a child of ten, but a few months out of her mother's care and those

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few months in the care of Causidiena! And I wouldn't believe it of you if you were twice your age."

"Oh," said Brinnaria, "I haven't acted like Caparronia and the two Oculatas, and I shouldn't if I were never so much left to myself. But you said yourself that Vesta can read my thoughts and I knew that without your telling me so. Suppose that my thoughts are as abominable in the sight of my Goddess as was the behavior of those three unfortunates? Oughtn't I to hang myself and be done with myself?"

"Indubitably," said the Emperor, "if the facts were as your words imply. But you are just frightening yourself to death with vapors like a child afraid of its own shadow. Be explicit, be definite, and I can put you at peace with yourself at once and permanently."

Brinnaria drew a deep breath.

"To begin with," she said, "you know that, before I was taken for a Vestal, I was plighted to Caius Segontius Almo."

"Certainly, I knew that," Aurelius replied. "All Rome knew of his ride from Falerii and of his arriving just too late."

"You knew I was in love with him?"

"I assumed that," the Emperor told her.

"Well," she said, a pathetic break in her voice, "I can't make myself stop loving Almo. I always have loved him, I always shall, I love him now."

"I assumed that too," the Emperor said. "All Rome knows of his resolve to remain unmarried, to wait thirty years for you, to marry you the very day you are free. I assumed that he would not be so constant unless he believed you equally constant. No harm in that! You have a right to marry at the end of your service and a right to look forward to it."

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"That is what troubles me," Brinnaria said. "I cannot feel that I have a right to look forward to it."

"Now listen to me," said the Emperor. "Few Vestals have left the Atrium at the end of their thirty years. Not every one that has left has married, the third Terentia withdrew at the end of her term and did not marry, nor did the only Licinia who ever completed her service. But Appellasia married and so did Quetonia and Seppia. Others have married after their service, though it is thought unlucky. The right to leave the order implies the right to marry after leaving. The right to leave implies the right to mean to leave, to plan to leave, to look forward to leaving and marrying. You have that right, like any other Vestal. Does that satisfy you?"

"It does not," Brinnaria asserted. "I know a Vestal has a right to leave and marry and to plan to leave and marry. But, after thirty years of service, or nearly thirty years of service, to plan to leave and marry and to look forward to it for a few days or months appear to me very different from looking forward to it from the first hour of my service, and knowing not only that I mean to marry, but just the man I mean to marry, and loving him all the time, and longing for him. I can't help it; I feel that way, and I dread that I am not an acceptable ministrant and I tremble for fear of the consequences to you and to Rome. I think I ought to hang myself and be done with it. You haven't comforted me a bit."

The Emperor stood up.

"Sit still!" he commanded, sharply.

He paced up and down the huge audience hall; paced its full length three times each way.

Then he reseated himself.

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"Do you sleep sound?" he queried.

"Like a top, mostly," said Brinnaria. "I go to sleep the instant I put my head on the pillow. Generally I sleep all night long until my maid wakes me up in the morning. Many nights, but not every night, nor most nights, I wake up with a dreadful start, as if I had had a nightmare, and lie there quaking for fear I am ruining Rome. But even then I generally go to sleep again pretty quick."

"Do you think of Almo when you wake up in the dark?" he pursued.

"Mighty little," she declared. "In the dark all I can think of is Rome and my duty. I often reflect how immediately and how greatly being taken for a Vestal changes a girl and alters, not only her outlook on life and her ways of thinking, but also her feelings. It has cooled and steadied me more than I could have believed. When Daddy quarrelled with Segontius and told me he would not let me marry Caius I used to feel as if I were going to suffocate, used to feel that way sometimes for hours at a time, used to suffer horribly, used to wake up in the dark and feel as if, if I could not get to Almo right then, at once, I should die, as if I should be choked to death by the thumping of my heart. I used to feel that way at dinner, when out visiting any time of day, for hours. I never feel that way now. And after Daddy and Segontius made up their quarrel and it was arranged that I was to marry Almo, I used to feel as if it would kill me to wait four years, I used to grit my teeth to think of it, of waiting four years for him; used to think of it all day long, no matter what I was doing. And I used to wake up in the dark and roll round in bed and bite the bed-clothes with rage at the thought of the long

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waiting ahead of me. I wanted Almo the way you want a drink, just before noon of a hot day, when you have been travelling since before sunrise and the carriage creaks and jolts and the road is all dusty and there is no wind and you feel as if you would rather die than go any longer without a drink. I used to want that way to be married to Almo.

"I never feel that way now. I want him and I want to be married to him, but I look forward to it as I look forward to the next race-day at the Circus or the next fight of gladiators at the Colosseum, as a desirable and delightful time sure to come but by no means to be hurried, as something I can very well do without until the time comes. The thought of Almo is always somewhere back in my mind ready to come forward when I have nothing else to think of. But I think of him placidly and calmly and never when on duty nor when at my lessons nor when at meals. And at night, never."

"My daughter," said Aurelius, smiling at her, "listen well to me. I speak as Chief Pontifex and as Emperor of Rome. I command you to forget your qualms and to banish your fears. Officially as Chief Pontifex I judge you a ministrant most acceptable to your Goddess, as a most fit and suitable Vestal. I judge that no girl naturally austere, frigid and self-contained could be half so pleasing to Vesta as a tempestuous child like you who curbs her temper and schools her outward behavior all she can in the effort to be all she ought to be; whose feelings even tame themselves without any effort of hers in the holy atmosphere of the Atrium.

"Manifestly you are telling the truth about your acts, your impulses and your thoughts, I judge you

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a pure-minded, clean-hearted Vestal, most suitable for her duties. Vesta understands and is glad of your good intentions and pleased with your struggles to master yourself. You are most acceptable to her. You will bring no curses on Rome, but your prayers will be heard and you will bring many blessings on the Empire. Be comforted!"

"I am," said Brinnaria simply, "and I shall stay comforted."

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BOOK II

THE REVOLT OF DESPONDENCY

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CHAPTER VIII

SCOURGING

AFTER her audience with the Emperor, Brinnaria felt more at peace with herself, succeeded better in curbing her native wildness, incurred less and less disapprobation and won increasingly the respect and affection of her elders. Her outbursts were less frequent and less violent, she learned to hold her tongue, to appear calm, to stand with dignity, to move with deliberation. Her admiration for Causidiena and Numisia and of their statuesque attitudes and queenly movements helped her a great deal by both conscious and unconscious imitation. It helped her more to find that she was succeeding better than Meffia. At first Brinnaria had been notably more prone than Meffia to assume gawky or ungainly postures, and, as she was the bigger of the two, she was the more conspicuous. Before long she began to improve in her bearing, but Meffia did not. Brinnaria held herself erect, head up and shoulders back. Meffia slouched and sagged along, a semi-boneless creature, her clothing hanging on her baggily and unbecomingly.

The difference was particularly noticeable at meals. In the Roman world all well-to-do people lay down to meals luxuriously extended on broad sofas. Brinnaria had always had trouble about her meal-time attitudes, and her mild easy-going mother had often had to speak to her and bid her remember herself. In the Atrium she

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had found her legs kept up their old habits of getting into strange postures, her feet seemed distressingly in evidence, and her knees always in the wrong place. Causidiena, tactful and sympathetic, solved the problem of how to influence her by getting her to watch Meffia and to contrast her with Manlia and Gargilia. They were almost as statuesque as their two elders, who reclined at table in attitudes scarcely less majestic than those of the Fates on the Parthenon pediment. Meffia sprawled uncouthly and was forever spreading her knees apart, generally with one up in the air. Her postures were so disgusting that Brinnaria was hot all over with determination not to be like Meffia.

She succeeded.

Great was her exultation when she perceived that it was no longer Brinnaria and Meffia who gave cause for concern to Causidiena, but Meffia and Brinnaria, great her triumph when she made sure that Causidiena had ceased worrying about her, or worried only at long intervals, but was perpetually solicitous concerning Meffia.

Meffia was indeed a cause of solicitude. She was stupid, slow and idle about her lessons, tearful on the slightest provocation, inert at all times and generally ailing, though never actually ill. She never looked clean, no matter how faithfully her maid toiled over her; she could somehow reduce, in an amazingly short time, the neatest attire to the semblance of mussed and rumpled rags; she slouched and shambled rather than walked, she lolled rather than sat.

Her hands were feeble and ineffective, her writing remained a childish scrawl, no matter how much she was made to practice, she dropped things continually

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and frequently spilt her food at meal-time. Most of all was her awkwardness manifest in the temple.

The temple was circular, its roof supported by eighteen splendid marble columns, the intervals between which were walled up to the height of not much more than five feet, the space from the top of the low wall to the roof being filled in with magnificent lattices of heavy cast bronze; so that the temple was a pleasant, breezy place on warm days, but very draughty in chilly weather and bitterly cold in winter. It contained no statue, nor any other object of worship, except in the center of its floor the circular altar on which burned the sacred fire, solemnly extinguished and ceremonially rekindled on each first of March, the New Year's day of the primitive Roman Calendar, but which must never at any other time be permitted to go out, upon whose continual burning depended the prosperity of Rome, according to the belief implicitly held by all Romans from the earliest days until Brinnaria's time, and for centuries after. The extinction of the perpetual fire, whether by accident or by neglect, was looked upon as a presage of frightful disaster to the nation, as an omen of impending horrors, almost as the probable cause of national misfortunes. Without qualification or doubt the people of Brinnaria's world believed that, as long as Vesta's holy fire burned steadily and brightly, Rome was assured the favor and protection of her gods; that, should it die out, their wrath was certain to be manifested in terrible afflictions involving the entire population.

The care of the fire was the chief duty of Brinnaria and her five associates, as it had been of their predecessors for more than nine hundred years. As maple was the sacred wood in the Roman ritual, maple only

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was used for the holy fire. The size of the pieces used and their shape was also a matter of immemorial ordinance. Each piece was about a cubit long, about the length of the forearm of an average adult, measured from elbow to finger-tips. Each piece must be wedge-shaped, with the bark on the rounded side and the other two sides meeting at a sharp edge where had been the heart of the trunk or branch from which it had been cut. Each piece must have been clean cleft with a strong sweep of the axe. The pieces varied from sections of stout trunks to mere slivers from slender boughs. All were of dry, well-seasoned wood, carefully prepared.

The placing of these on the fire was a matter of ritual and might be done no otherwise than as prescribed. It was quite a delicate art to lay the necessary piece in just the right place and at just the right angle; it required more than a little good sense and discretion to know just when a piece was required, for the fire must not burn violently nor must it smoulder, it must be steady but not strong. This discretion, this good sense, Meffia was slow to acquire. The art of laying the wood properly she acquired very imperfectly. She did it well enough under direction; but, even with Causidiena watching her, she was likely to drop the piece of wood on the floor, or, what was worse, to drop it on the fire instead of laying it on. The scattering of ashes on the floor of the temple was held unseemly, that live coals should fall from the Altar was considered almost sacrilegious. Meffia, more than once, perpetrated such appalling blunders. Very tardily did she learn her duties; only after four years could she be trusted to take her regular turn in care of the fire

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and to stand her watch of half a night each time her turn came between sunset and sunrise.

During these four years she had grown into a not unpersonable young woman, for Roman girls were generally young women at fourteen years of age. She was never ruddy or robust, always pale, delicate-looking and fragile-seeming, never actually ill, but usually ailing, peevish, limp and querulous. Life in the Atrium largely consisted in the effort to keep Meffia well, to make sure that she was not overtired, to foresee and forestall opportunities for her to blunder, to repair the consequences of her mistakes, generally to protect and guide her.

In the same four years Brinnaria had developed into a muscular girl, tall, amply fleshed, robust, rosy, full of healthy vigor, lithe and strong. She was radiantly handsome, knew it and was proud of it. Her duties she knew to the last, least detail and Causidiena trusted her quite as much as Manlia or Gargilia.

One spring night it was Meffia's watch until midnight, at which time Brinnaria was to relieve her. It was the custom that, at the end of her watch, the Vestal on duty made sure that the fire was burning properly and then left it and herself waked her relief, it being entirely inconceivable that, under roof and protected all round by bronze lattices, a properly burning fire could go out in the brief space of time required to leave the temple, enter the court-yard, cross it, ascend the stairs and for the relieving Vestal to reach the temple by the same path reversed.

Brinnaria was a sound sleeper. She woke in the pitch dark with the instant conviction that she had slept long past midnight, with a sudden qualm of apprehension, of boding, almost of terror.

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She was a methodical creature for all her wildness, and very neat in her habits. By touch, almost without groping, she dressed in the dark. Silently she slipped out of her room, noiselessly she closed the door, softly she groped her way to the stairs, down the stairs out into the courtyard to the corner of the colonnade. There, a pace or two beyond the pillars, under the open sky, she peered up.

The gray light of dawn was faintly hinted in the blackish canopy of cloud above her.

Swiftly she flitted the length of the court, whisking past the dimly-seen columns; swiftly she traversed the three small rooms at its eastern end, panting she plunged through the dark doorway into the dark temple.

There was no flicker of fire-light on the carved and gilded panels of the lofty ceiling; the ceiling, in fact, was invisible, unguessable in the gloom.

There was no glow upon the altar, not even a glimmer of redness through the ashes.

Brinnaria held her hand over the ashes. Nowhere could she discern more than the merest hint of warmth. On the back of her hands, as on the back of her neck, she could feel the chill of the faintly stirring dawn wind that breathed through the bronze lattices and across the temple interior.

She felt among the wood piled ready, found a slender sliver of a cleft branchlet, and methodically ploughed the ashes across and across. She did bring to the surface a faint redness, but not even one coal which could have been blown into sufficient heat to start a flame on her splinter of dry maple.

A sound assailed her ears.

Meffia snoring!

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Guided by the gurgling noise she found Meffia crumpled in a heap on the mosaic floor against the base of one of the pillars.

Brinnaria kicked her once viciously and shook her repeatedly.

Slowly, dazedly, Meffia half awoke, whining:

"Where am I?" she gasped.

"In the temple!" Brinnaria replied.

"Oh!" Meffia exclaimed, "what has happened?"

"You went to sleep, you little fool," Brinnaria raged at her, "and the fire has gone out."

"Oh! what shall we do?" wailed Meffia, "what shall we do?"

"Do?" snarled Brinnaria. "It's plain enough what you have to do. Go to your room, go to bed and go to sleep, stay asleep, keep your mouth shut, say nothing, pretend you woke me at midnight, pretend you had nothing to do with the fire going out, pretend you know nothing about it, keep your face straight, keep mum, leave the rest to me!"

"But," wailed Meffia, "if they think you let the fire go out you'll be scourged for it."

"Well," snapped Brinnaria, "what's that to you? Go to bed."

"But," Meffia insisted, "I let it go out. I ought to take the blame, not you. I ought to be scourged with you."

"You insufferable little idiot," Brinnaria hurled at her, "you never could stand a flogging, you'd die of it most likely. To a certainty you'd be ill, and have to be sent off to be nursed and kept away for a month or more to recover. I won't have Causidiena worried with any such performances. And as sure as the fire is out, you'd behave like the poor creature you are,

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you'd scream and howl and faint and shame us all.

"No flogging of you if I can help it!

"Now, go to bed!"

"But," protested Meffia, "why need either of us be flogged? I have tinder and flint and steel in my room. We could light the fire and no one ever know it."

"You imbecile child! You silly baby! You wicked, horrible, sacrilegious girl!" Brinnaria stormed. "You irreligious, atheistical, blasphemous wretch! To save your hide you'd desecrate the temple, pollute the Altar, anger Vesta, make all our prayers in vain, bring down curses without count on Rome and all of us. Be silent! Don't you dare to speak another word! Off to bed with you!"

"But," Meffia trembled, "you hate me; why do you take my punishment?"

"I don't hate you," hissed Brinnaria. "I despise you! And I've told you why I'm going to take the licking. Off to bed with you!"

"But," Meffia still persisted, "what will you do?"

"Do?" whispered Brinnaria. "Do? Why I'll curl up where you've left a warm spot on the floor and go to sleep and sleep till some one finds me. I can sleep any time."

"But think of the scourging!" Meffia insisted.

"I shan't," Brinnaria maintained. "I shan't think of it a moment. I never did mind a licking. It's bad enough while it lasts, but soon over. No licking will worry me. I'll sleep like a top. Off to bed with you, or I'll break every bone in your worthless body!"

Meffia started to speak again; Brinnaria caught her gullet in one strong, young hand. clutched her neck with the other, and craftily pressed one thumb behind one of Meffia's ears.

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Meffia squeaked like a snared rabbit.

"There!" Brinnaria whispered fiercely. "Now you know how badly I can hurt you when I try. If you let on that it was you and not I that let the fire go out what I did to you then won't amount to anything to what I'll do to you. I'll kill you. Promise you'll keep mum."

"I promise," gasped Meffia.

"Go to bed!" Brinnaria hissed.

Meffia went.

Brinnaria, left alone, did all she could to make the ashes on the Altar look like the remains of a fire that had died out of itself, to efface all signs of her efforts to find live coals under the ashes. She judged that she had succeeded pretty well.

Then she composed herself on the floor and was asleep in ten breaths.

There Manlia found her when the daylight was already strong.

When wakened Brinnaria merely remarked:

"It can't be helped. I always did sleep too sound."

That day was a gloomy day in Rome. The report was noised abroad that the holy fire had gone out and a chill of horror spread through all classes of the population, from the richest to the poorest.

The Romans were very far from being what they are represented to have been by unsympathetic modern writers on them. Practically all modern writers have been unsympathetic with the Romans, for the Romans were Pagans and all modern writers on them have been more or less Christians, chiefly interested in Pagans because most Pagans were in the later centuries converted to Christianity. With that fact in the foreground of their thoughts and with the utterances of

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Roman skeptics and dilettantes well in view, most modern writers assert, what they sincerely believe, that the Romans had only the vaguest and most lukewarm religious faith, and no vivid devout convictions at all.

The facts were entirely the other way. There were agnostics among the cultured leisure classes, there were unbelievers of various degrees everywhere in the towns and cities. But the mass of the population, not only universally, all over the country-side, but collectively in the urban centers, believed in their gods as implicitly as they believed in heat and cold, birth and death, fire and water, pleasure and pain. Government, from the Roman point of view, was a partnership between the Roman people, as represented by their senate, and the gods. Under the Republic every election had appeared to the Romans who participated in it to be a rite for ascertaining what man would be most pleasing to the gods to fill the position in question. Under the Empire the selection of a new Emperor, whether a confirmation by the senate of the previous Emperor's accredited heir, or an acclamation by the army of the soldiers' favorite, appeared to the Romans as the determination of the gods' preference for a particular individual as their chief partner.

The choice of war or peace, of battle or manœuvring for delay, seemed to the Romans the taking of the advice of the gods, who manifested their injunctions by various signs, by the appearance of the liver, heart, lungs and kidneys of the cattle and sheep sacrificed, by the flight of birds, by the shape of the flames of altar-fires, all regarded as definite answers to explicit questions; who also made suggestions or gave warnings by means of earthquakes, floods, conflagrations,

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pestilences, eclipses, by the aurora borealis, by any sort of strange happening.

The extinction of the sacred fire in the Temple of Vesta was looked upon as a categorical warning that the behavior of the Romans or of some part of them or the conduct of the government was so displeasing to the gods that the Empire would come to a sudden end unless matters were at once corrected. All Romans believed that as implicitly as they believed that food would keep them alive or that steel could kill them.

Therefore the days after Meffia let the fire go out were gloomy days in Rome. The report of a great defeat for their army, with a terrible slaughter of their best soldiers would not have depressed the crowds more. The people were as dazed, numb and silent as after the first news of a terrific disaster. Every kind of public amusement or diversion was postponed, merry-making ceased everywhere, the wildest and most reckless felt no inclination towards frivolity, even the games of children were checked and repressed, gravity and solemnity enveloped the entire city and its vast suburbs. The men talked soberly, as if at a funeral; while for women of every degree, but especially for the matrons of the upper classes, the three ensuing days were days of prayer and fasting.

For the Pontiffs they were anxious and busy days. Both Emperors were away from Rome, Lucius Verus in Greece, on his way home from Antioch and the great victories of his three years' campaign against the Parthians, Marcus Aurelius in Germany hastening from point to point along the headwaters of the Rhine and Danube, desperately resisting the pertinacious attacks of the Marcomanni. The Pontiffs were without their chief and acted under the leadership of Faltonius Bam-

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bilio, Pontifex of Vesta, the busiest and most anxious of them all. In consultation with the august College of Pontiffs, hastily assembled at the Regia, a splendid building occupying the site of Numa's rustic palace, near the great Forum and close to the Temple of Vesta, he arranged for the necessary ceremonial of expiation and atonement.

Besides the fasting of the women all over the city, besides their day-long and night-long prayers, besides the sacrifices which each matron must personally offer in her own house, besides the sacrifices which must be offered for the matrons in the Temple of Castor and in the less popular women's temples in every quarter of the city, there must be public sacrifices of cattle, sheep and swine, there must be solemn and gorgeous processions; every sort of ceremonial traditionally supposed to mitigate the wrath of the gods, to placate them, to win their favor, must be carried out with every detail of care, with the utmost magnificence.

Meanwhile, and above all, the negligent Vestal must be punished; and at once the sacred fire must be ritually rekindled.

The ritual rekindling worried and exhausted Bambilio not a little.

The procedure was traditional and rigidly prescribed in every detail. The sacred fire might not be rekindled by anything so modern as a flint and steel, far less by anything so much more modern as a burning glass.

The primitive fire drill must be used and the fresh fire produced by the friction of wood on wood.

The ritual prescribed that a plank of apple wood, about two inches thick, about two feet wide and about three feet long, should be placed on a firm support, upon which it would rest solidly without any tendency

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to joggle. At its middle was bored a small circular depression, about the size of a man's thumb-nail and shallow. Into this was thrust the tapered end of a round rod of maple wood about as thick as a large man's thumb. The upper end of the rod fitted freely into a socket in a ball of maple wood of suitable size to be held in the left hand and pressed down so as to press the lower end of the rod into the hole in the apple-wood plank. Round the middle of the rod was looped a bow-string kept taut by a strong bow. By grasping the bow in his right hand and sawing it back and forth, the operator caused the rod to whirl round, first one way and then the other, with great velocity. The friction of its lower end soon heated up the hole in the apple-wood plank, and round that were piled chips of dry apple-wood, which, if the operator was strong and skilled, soon burst into flame.

Bambilio was fat and clumsy. Before he had succeeded he was dripping with perspiration, limp with weariness and ready to faint. But succeed he did. The quart or more of apple-wood chips burst into flame at last, Causidiena, standing ready with the prescribed copper sieve, caught the blazing chips as they were tilted off the plank, conveyed them to the Altar, placed maple splinters on them, and soon had the sacred fire burning properly.

The punishment of the guilty Vestal was even more a matter of concern, of trepidation. She must be scourged that very night, and, as in respect to the re-kindling of the fire, every detail of what must be done was prescribed by immemorial tradition, long since committed to writing, among the statutes of the order.

The scourging must be done by the Pontiff himself. The scourge must be one with a maple-wood handle

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and three thongs of leather made from the hide of a roan heifer. In each thong were knotted the tiny, horny half-hoofs of a newborn white lamb, eight to a thong, twenty-four in all. These bits of horny hoof tore and cut terribly the bare back of the victim. It was prescribed that the scourge must be laid on vigorously, not lightly.

The Vestal scourged must be entirely nude. As it would have been sacrilege unspeakable for a man to see the ankle or shoulder of a Vestal, let alone her entire body, it was enjoined that the scourging take place at midnight, in a shut room, and that a woolen curtain should hang between the Pontifex and his victim.

Bambilio was terribly wrought up at the prospect of the perplexing and delicate duty before him. He was fat and short-winded and would suffer from the effort of laying on the blows. He was as pious as possible and quaked inwardly with the dread that, in spite of the dark room and the curtain, he might catch a glimpse of his victim and bring down the wrath of the gods on himself and on Rome. And, apart from all else, he was shame-faced and hot and cold at the idea of being in the same room, even in a darkened room screened by a curtain, with a naked Vestal. He blushed and shuddered. To be sure, it was prescribed that one other Vestal was to be in the room, on the same side of the curtain as the victim, to say when the scourging had continued long enough and the negligent Vestal had been sufficiently punished. But this comforted Bambilio very little.

He wished the ordeal over.

At midnight he stood in the dark, close to the curtain. The darkness was not as dark as he should have liked. Some ghost of a glimmer of starshine filtered

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into the room and he could make out the shape of the curtain. He waited, scourge in hand.

Presently Numisia spoke, told him that Brinnaria was prepared for her beating, took his left hand and guided it in the dark. He felt the curtain's edge against his wrist, felt a warm soft elbow, grasped it, and at once gained a notion of the direction in which he was to lay on his blows.

He struck round the other side of the curtain and felt that the scourge met its mark, but slantingly and draggingly. He tried again and seemed to do better. For the third blow he made the scourge whistle through the air.

"Hit harder, you old fool," spoke Brinnaria, "you're barely tapping me!"

That made him angry and Brinnaria experienced as severe a scourging as any fat old gentleman could have compassed.

She did not shriek, sob or whimper: not a sound escaped her. She suffered, suffered acutely, particularly when one of the lamb hoofs struck a second time on a bleeding gash in her back or on a swollen weal. But her physical pain was drowned in a rising tide of anger and wrath. She felt the long repressed, half-forgotten tomboy, hoyden Brinnaria surging up in her and gaining mastery. She fairly boiled with rage, she blazed and flamed inwardly with a conflagration of resentment. It was all she could do not to tear down the curtain, spring on Bambilio, wrench his scourge from his hand and lay it on him. She kept still and silent, but she felt her inward tornado of emotion gaining strength.

When Numisia spoke Bambilio let go Brinnaria's arm and stepped back a pace.

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"My daughter," he said, "you have been punished enough. Your punishment is accomplished. This is sufficient."

Then Brinnaria spoke, in a voice tense, not with pain, but with fury:

"You won't hit me again?"

"No, my daughter," said Bambilio, "no more."

"You have quite done beating me?" she demanded.

"Quite done," he replied.

Then, unexpectedly to herself, Brinnaria's wrath boiled over.

"Then," she fairly yelled at him, "I'm going to begin beating you. Shut your eyes. I'm going to pull down the curtain!"

Numisia made a horrified grab at Brinnaria and missed her. Brinnaria gave her a push; Numisia slipped, fell her length on the floor, struck her head and either fainted or was stunned.

Bambilio, his eyes tight shut, the instant after Numisia's head cracked the floor, heard snap the string supporting the curtain.

He shut his eyes tighter.

He felt the scourge wrenched from his limp fingers, felt the back of his neck grasped by a muscular young hand, felt the impact of the twenty-four sheep-hoofs on his back.

Through his clothing they stung and smarted.

There came another blow and another. Bambilio tried to get away, but he dreaded unseemly contact with a naked Vestal and did not succeed in his efforts. The blows fell thick and fast. He was an old man exhausted by a long day of excitement and by his exertions while scourging Brinnaria.

His knees knocked together, he gasped, he snorted;

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the pain of the blows made him feel faint; he collapsed on the floor.

Then Brinnaria did beat him, till the blood ran from his back almost as from hers, beat him till the old man fainted dead away.

When her arm was tired she gave him a kick, threw the scourge on him and groped for Numisia.

Numisia had sat up.

"My child," she said, "why did you do it?"

"I don't know," snarled Brinnaria. "I was furious. I did it before I thought. Are you hurt?"

"No," said Numisia. "Don't tell any one you pushed me. I'll never tell. I don't blame you, dear."

She fainted again.

Causidiena, waiting under the colonnade of the courtyard, was appalled to descry in the gloom a totally naked Brinnaria, a mass of clothing hanging over her arm.

"My child," she protested, "why did you not put on your clothes?"

"I don't care who sees me!" Brinnaria retorted. "I'm boiling hot; I'm all over sweat and blood and my back's cut to ribbons."

"What are you going to do?" Causidiena queried.

"I'm going to bed," Brinnaria replied. "Please send Utta to me and tell her to bring the turpentine jug and the salt box."

"My dear," Causidiena objected, "you'll never endure the pain!"

"Yes, I shall," Brinnaria maintained. "I'll set my teeth and stand the smart. I don't mean to have a festered back. I'll have Utta rub me with salt and turpentine from neck to hips; I'll be asleep before she's done rubbing."

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"I'll come and see she does it properly," Causidiena said.

"Better not," said Brinnaria. "Numisia and Bambilio need you worse than I do."

"Why?" queried Causidiena.

"After Bambilio was done beating me," Brinnaria explained calmly, "I beat him. Numisia tried to stop me and somehow fell on the floor and was stunned. She came to after I was done with Bambilio, but she fainted again. I beat him till he is just a lump of raw meat, eleven-twelfths dead, wallowing in his blood like a sausage in a plate of gravy."

"My child!" Causidiena cried, "this is sacrilege!"

"Not a bit of it!" Brinnaria maintained, a tall, white shape in the star-shine, waving her armful of clothing. "I have pored over the statutes of the order. It was incumbent on me to keep still and silent all through my licking. But I defy you or any other Vestal or any Pontiff or Flamen or either of the Emperors to show me a word on the statutes of the order or in any other sacred writing that forbids a Vestal, after her thrashing, to beat the Pontifex to red pulp. I have. You'd better go help him; he might die. And poor Numisia needs reviving. I'm all right; send me Utta and the salt and turpentine, and I'll be fit for duty in a day or two."

"You terrible child!" said Causidiena.

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CHAPTER IX

ALARMS

THE next year was the year of the great pestilence. Pestilence, indeed, had ravaged Italy for five consecutive summers previous to that year. But the great pestilence, for two centuries afterwards spoken of merely as "the pestilence," fell in the nine hundred and nineteenth year after the founding of Rome, the year 166 of our era, when Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus had been co-Emperors for a little more than five years and Brinnaria had been almost five years a Vestal. It devastated the entire Empire from Nisibis in upper Mesopotamia to Segontium, opposite the isle of Anglesea. Every farm, hamlet and village suffered; in not one town did it leave more than half the inhabitants alive; few cities escaped with so much as a third of the population surviving. Famine accompanied the pestilence in all the western portions of the Roman world, and from famine perished many whom the plague had spared.

This disaster was, in fact, the real deathblow to Rome's greatness and from it dates the decline of the Roman power. It broke the tradition of civilization and culture which had grown from the small beginnings of the primitive Greeks and Etruscans more than two thousand years before. During all those two thousand years there had been a more or less steady and a scarcely interrupted development of the agriculture,

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manufactures, arts, skill, knowledge and power of the mass of humanity about the Mediterranean Sea; men who fought with shields and spears and swords, also with arrows and slings, believed in approximately the same sort of gods; wore clothing rather wrapped round them than upholstered on their bodies as with us; reclined on sofas at meals; lived mostly out of doors all the year round; built their houses about courtyards, and made rows of columns the chief feature of their architecture, and sheltering themselves in colonnades, sunny or shady according to the time of the year, the chief feature of their personal comfort. Up to the year of the great pestilence that civilization had prospered, had produced a long series of generals, inventors, architects, sculptors, painters, musicians, poets, authors, and orators. Everywhere men had shown self-confidence, capacity, originality, power and competence and had achieved success for two thousand years.

The great pestilence of 166 so depleted the population that Rome never again pushed forward the boundaries of her Empire. Some lucky armies won occasional victories, but Rome never again put on the field an overwhelming army for foreign conquest, never again could fully man, even defensively, the long line of her frontiers.

All classes of the people suffered, but most of all the rich, the well-to-do, the educated and the cultured classes of the towns and cities. And the main point of difference between the great pestilence and the others which had preceded it was the universality of its incidence. For two thousand years pestilence had occurred at intervals, but previously not everywhere at once. If one country suffered others did not; if half the Mediterranean world, even, was devastated, the other half

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escaped. From the immune regions competence and capacity had flowed into the ruined areas and civilization had gone on. But the great pestilence left no district unharmed. In six months it killed off all the brains and skill, all the culture and ingenuity in the Empire. There were so few capable men left in any line of activity that the next generation grew up practically untaught. The tradition of two thousand years was broken. In all the Mediterranean world, until centuries later, descendants of the savage invaders developed their new civilization on the ruins of the old; no man ever again made a great speech, wrote a great book or play or poem, painted a good picture, carved a good statue, or contrived a good campaign or battle. The brains of the Roman world died that year, the originality of the whole nation was killed at once, the tradition broke off.

Of course, the survivors did not realize the finality of the disaster, but they did realize its magnitude. In Italy, fed almost wholly by imported food, the famine was most severe. In Italy the pestilence was most virulent. Men disputed as to whether the great army of Lucius Verus, returned home from its splendid victories in Parthia, had brought with it a form of pestilence worse than that of the five previous years, or whether the returned soldiers had merely been a specially easy prey to the pestilence already abroad in Rome. Whichever was true, the veterans died like flies. So did the residents of Rome. Whole blocks of tenements were emptied of their last occupier and stood wholly vacant; many palaces of the wealthy were left without so much as a guardian, the last inmate dead; the splendid furnishings, even the silver plate, untouched in every room; for the plague had so ravaged Rome that

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there were not even robbers and thieves left to steal.

To the survivors, since genuine piety as they knew it was all but universal among the Romans, it was some small comfort, a faint ray of hope, a sign that the gods were not inexorably wrathful, that, after Rabulla's death, there was no case of pestilence in the Atrium, not even among the servitors, that no Vestal so much as sickened. Through it all the six remained hale and sound.

But when the plague abated, only Manlia had any living relations left her. The other five had lost every kinsman and kinswoman, to the ninth and tenth degree. Brinnaria's parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and cousins were all among the victims. This left her grave and sobered with grief, with no trace of her girlish wildness apparent.

It also left her enormously rich, one of the wealthiest women in Rome.

Not a tenth so wealthy, but still very rich, it left Almo, Vocco and Flexinna, all of whom survived.

As the plague had been rife, worse each year, for some seasons before the year of the great pestilence, so, ebbing yearly, it continued for some years after its acme. As soon as the worst was manifestly over the life of Rome began to revive to some degree, the city-dwellers plucked up heart, the refugees began to return to their town houses, hunger and terror were forgotten, industry and commerce rallied, bustle and activity increased from day to day, and, slowly indeed, but steadily, Rome returned to its normal activity and appearance. The survivors reconstructed their life on the old lines, the streets and squares were again thronged, the public baths, those vast casinos of ancient club-life, were daily crowded with idlers.

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The repopulation of the city brought into it many rich families from towns all over the Roman world. Their influx sent up the price of large residences and caused much activity in the renting and selling of properties suitable for the homes of people of ample means.

Brinnaria, without a male relation of even the remotest degree, came to lean more and more on Vocco, the husband of her chum Flexinna. He was a young man of not unpleasing appearance and of courtly manners, but very haughty, reserved and silent by nature; and exceedingly spare, lean and wiry, with black hair and brows, a complexion as if tanned and weather-beaten and an habitual frown. He was fond of Brinnaria and unbent to her more than to most of his acquaintances. She treated him as a sort of honorary cousin and turned over to him many details of the care of her large and scattered property. He took upon himself in her interest the sale or management of her distant estates, found for them capable overseers or purchasers at advantageous prices, bought slaves where they were needed, arranged for the marketing of the more important products and accounted to her for the proceeds.

About her town properties he had more trouble and some exasperation, for he found the apparently practical and unsentimental Brinnaria oddly unwilling to disturb the contents of the palaces in which her kinsmen had lived and died. She was naturally a good business woman and all her instincts urged her to increase her capital and her income by every means within her power and at every opportunity. Yet, when Vocco came to her with offers of high prices for the various buildings which she had inherited he could induce her to arrange for the sale only of the smaller and less valuable houses,

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or of those tenements which had been owned merely to rent, but had never been inhabited by any members of the Brinnarian clan. At the suggestion of preparing for sale any of the palaces of her near kinsfolk she balked; from the barest hint towards moving the furniture in her father's home she recoiled in horror. Vocco found himself faced by invincible femininity, with the possession of which he would not have credited Brinnaria. At first he was irritated. As he missed sale after sale he became more and more aggravated. But he kept his temper, held his tongue and waited for Brinnaria's mood to alter. Her sentimentality gradually waned as the prices offered steadily mounted. After long hesitation she gave orders to sell at auction the furniture from the house of a distant cousin, and to rent the house. That broke the spell. One by one the late abodes of the Brinnarii were cleared and sold; sold furniture and all, cleared and rented, or rented furnished.

The former dwellings of her aunts and uncles she was reluctant to disturb. She felt a sort of sacredness about these splendid houses where she had been merry as a child. When at last she made up her mind to part with one she would not give the order to sell it until she had gone over it herself and selected some pieces of furniture which she specially valued. Vocco tried to dissuade her, but she would not listen to him.

Her visit to the vast, empty palace had a most depressing effect on her. All her grief at her countless bereavements rushed back over her in a flood and overwhelmed her. She would not allow a stick of furniture to be moved and withdrew her consent to the sale.

Vocco was patient and silent.

After a time this mood, too, wore off.

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She had that particular dwelling emptied and sold and, once that first step taken, under the pressure of hugely profitable offers, sold all the other properties.

In each case she insisted on inspecting the houses room by room before anything was moved. After the first she had no hysterical qualms, did not show any outward emotion, selected what she meant to keep for herself, ordered the sale of the rest, remained calm through it all.

Finally Vocco came to her with a most tempting offer for her childhood home. Brinnaria took a night to think it over.

She had not entered the place since her father's funeral. He had been the last of the family to die, three months after his wife, and some days after his last surviving son. During the lengthy interval the palace had stood shut fast, cared for only by a few slaves, and those not life-long family servants, but recent purchases; for the pestilence had carried off with their masters nearly all the home-bred house slaves.

At the thought of going through the deserted halls and silent rooms Brinnaria winced. But she nerved herself up to it. She named a day on which she meant to face the ordeal, asked Vocco to order the palace swept and dusted, and announced to Guntello, almost the sole survivor of her father's personal servitors, that he was to accompany her.

When the day came she set out, not in her carriage, but in her litter, with eight Cilician bearers, her lictor running ahead and Guntello and Utta walking behind.

She began her survey accompanied by Guntello and Utta. But when she came to the nursery and schoolroom she sent the two away, told them to wait for her in the peristyle, shut herself in and had a long, hard

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cry; precisely as if she had been, as of old, a little girl hurt or angry or vexed. After she had wept till no more tears flowed she felt relieved and comforted.

She called Utta, had her bring water, bathed her face and sent the maid away again.

Then she resolutely examined room after room. The second floor took a long while, for there were many doors to open and close for the last time.

There was a third floor, a feature possessed by few dwellings in Rome in ancient times. The Imperial Palace, which later towered to even seven stories, was unique in Brinnaria's time, in the possession of five superposed floors. The great palace of Sallust, near the Salarian Gate, had but three.

To the third floor she mounted. Before she had investigated half the rooms she found a door fast. What was more, as she tried it, she thought she heard a sound, as of human movement, inside that room.

Brinnaria was no weakling. Methodically she tried that door with her full, young strength, tried it all along its edge opposite its hinges, tried it at the middle, at the top, at the bottom. She made sure the door was not stuck or jammed; she was convinced that it was bolted within the room.

She leaned over the railing of the gallery and called Guntello.

The odd note in her voice brought that faithful giant up the stairs, two steps at a time; the beams of the house, even the marble steps of the stair, seemed to quiver under his tread.

She had him try the door. He agreed that it was bolted.

"Can you break it in?" she queried.

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Guntello laughed. "Without half trying, little Mistress," he replied.

Brinnaria's voice came hard and sharp.

"You in that room!" she called, "unbolt that door and come out, or it will be the worse for you. I'll count ten and then order the door burst open."

She began to count.

She heard the bolt shot back.

She nodded to Guntello.

He gave the door a push.

Before them stood Calvaster, his attitude and countenance expressing cringing cowardice, cloaked by ill-assumed effrontery. He did not speak, trying to appear unconcerned.

"What are you doing in my house?" Brinnaria demanded.

"I do not wonder that you are astonished to see me here and angry as well," Calvaster replied, "but the explanation is simple. I learned that you were proposing to sell the property. I had a curiosity to see it as it is. I found means to slip in and go over the building. I counted on leaving before you arrived. I miscalculated, that is all. Awkward for both of us, but unintentional on my part."

"I don't believe half of that rigmarole," snapped Brinnaria.

"It is all true, nevertheless," Calvaster asserted with an air of injured innocence.

"One thing is plain, anyhow," Brinnaria declared. "You bribed one of my slaves. Which one did you bribe?"

Calvaster kept his lips pressed tight together.

"March him downstairs, Guntello," Brinnaria commanded.

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Calvaster winced and made as if to dodge. Big as he was Guntello was wonderfully quick. In a flash he had the intruder by the neck. Utterly helpless Calvaster was marched down the stairs.

In the courtyard Brinnaria had brought before her the half dozen slaves who had charge of the empty house. They stood in a row fidgeting and glancing at each other.

"Now," she demanded of Calvaster, "point out which one you bribed."

Calvaster remained motionless and mute.

"Hurt him, Guntello," said Brinnaria.

Guntello applied a few simple twists and squeezes, such as schoolboys of all climes employ on their victims.

Calvaster yielded at once and indicated one of the suspects.

"Throw him out, Guntello," said Brinnaria.

When Guntello returned he cheerfully inquired, with the easy assurance of an indulged favorite.

"Shall I kill Tranio, Mistress?"

"No!" said Brinnaria viciously. "I wouldn't have a toad killed on the word of that contemptible scoundrel. Give Tranio a moderate beating and hand him over to Olynthides to be sold at auction without a character."

Her survey of her former home and her selection of the ornaments, pictures, statues, articles of furniture and other objects which she desired reserved for herself she completed with an air less of melancholy than of puzzled thought.

She was off duty for all of that day and night and was to dine with Flexinna and Vocco. In the course of the pestilence they had inherited a magnificent abode on the Esquiline. In particular it had a private bath

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with a large swimming-pool. The Vestals were the only ladies in Rome who might not enjoy the magnificent public baths, to which all Roman society flocked every afternoon, somewhat as we moderns throng a beach at a fashionable seaside resort. Brinnaria, who loved swimming, felt the deprivation keenly. The Atrium had luxurious baths, but no swimming-pool. Whenever Brinnaria dined with Flexinna she particularly enjoyed the swim the two always took together before dinner. On that afternoon, while they were revelling in the water, Brinnaria told Flexinna of her adventure.

"I can't conjecture," she said, "what motive brought him there. I have been racking my brains about it ever since it happened and it is an enigma to me."

"No riddle to me," Flexinna declared. "It's as c-c-clear as d-d-daylight."

"If you are so sure," said Brinnaria, "explain. I have no guess even."

"Why," expounded Flexinna, "he was there to c-c-collect evidence against you. He hates you because you wouldn't marry him and he is t-t-tenaciously resolved to be revenged. He is on the lookout for anything that might d-d-discredit you. He hoped to spy on an interview b-b-between you and Almo, for he surmised that you would arrange to have Almo meet you in the empty house!"

"The nasty beast!" cried Brinnaria, shocked. "How dare he?"

"Oh, b-b-be sensible," Flexinna admonished her. "You know the k-k-kind he is. He's b-b-bound to impute to everybody what he would d-d-do in their p-p-place. Any man under the same circumstances would jump at the same suspicions."

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"But why?" queried Brinnaria, bewildered and angry.

"Think a minute," said Flexinna. "To suspect all women is a c-c-convention, almost an axiom, with most men. All men like C-C-Calvaster assume that every married woman is interested in some man b-b-besides her husband, or in almost any man, and if married women are under suspicion, on the assumption that one husband is not enough, of c-c-course you Vestals, who haven't even a husband, are doubly under suspicion."

"Bah!" snarled Brinnaria, "you make me cross!"

"Facts are facts," Flexinna summed up.

Brinnaria did not retort. She had climbed out of the tank and was seated on the edge, the drops streaming off her in rivulets, watching the ripples her toes made in the water.

"Facts are facts," she echoed, "and conjectures are merely conjectures; what is more, conjectures ought to have some basis in fact. You assert, as if you know it to be true, that Calvaster expected Almo to meet me to-day. But Almo is at Falerii."

"No, he's not," Flexinna retorted; "he's b-b-been in t-t-town t-t-ten d-d-days and has had the old house on the C-C-Carinæ reopened. He's settling d-d-down to live in Rome."

Brinnaria flushed.

"I think," she said, scrambling to her feet, "that he might have had enough consideration for me to stay in the country."

"So d-d-do I," said Flexinna.

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CHAPTER X

CONFERENCE

SOME months later, during one of the brief and infrequent breathing spells in his ten years' fight to beat off the raids of the Marcomanni and other Germanic tribes, Aurelius returned from the Rhine frontier to Rome. As soon as she was reasonably sure that the Emperor was rested from the fatigues of his journey and had disposed of the worst of his accumulated routine duties, Brinnaria sought a second audience with the chief of the nation.

She was then a tall, grave girl of nineteen, looking and behaving like a woman of twenty-five. Very handsome she was, full-fleshed without a trace of plumpness, full breasted without a hint of overabundance. Her brown hair, now grown long again after its ceremonial shearing at her entrance into the order of Vestals, was so dark that it was almost black. Arranged in the six braids traditional for Vestals and wound round her head like a coronet it became her notably. Her complexion was creamy, with a splendid brilliant color that came and went in her cheeks. Her expression of face was an indescribable blend of kindliness and haughtiness towards others, of austerity and cheerfulness inwardly, of intellectuality and comprehension towards life at large. She had acquired the statuesqueness of the conventional Vestal attitudes and movements, but she sat and stood so that all beholders felt a vivid im-

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pression of her vitality, of reserve strength, incomparably beyond anything possessed by her five colleagues. Her stately pacing as she walked always appeared the conscious restraint of what, of itself, would have been a swinging stride. She wore her clothes with an unanalyzable difference, with a sort of effrontery, as Calvaster put it in talking of her to his cronies.

On her way to the palace, erect in her white robes amid the gorgeous crimson hangings of her gilded state-coach, she meditated on the great dissimilarity between the feelings with which she had gone to her first audience with the Emperor and those with which she now approached his abode. Then she had been palpitating with conscientious scruples and childish dreads, now she was sure of herself and of her errand; then she had thought chiefly of her mother and of the traditions of her family and clan, now not only her mother was dead, but the whole family of the Epulones had perished except herself and the Brinnarian clan was represented by but three families, her relationship to which was fainter than any assignable degree of cousinship; then she had been full of elation at her lofty position in the world, now she was perfectly at home in her environment and felt no emotion at the thought of it.

At the palace she found herself in the same vast room, alone with a somewhat older and graver Emperor, now sole ruler of their world since the death of his colleague, Lucius Verus. He greeted her kindly, with an air of effort to conceal his weariness, and when both were seated asked her errand.

"In the first place," she said, "I want you to tell me whether you are satisfied with the reports you have had of me."

Aurelius half smiled.

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"I am well pleased in respect to all your actions but one," he said. "You have certainly done better than I expected or hoped. You have curbed your wild nature so well that, of late years, you have behaved altogether as a Vestal should. Even earlier your conduct was creditable, since from the very day of your promise to me, your outbursts were less and less frequent and also less and less violent. Once only have you acted so that I felt displeased when I heard what you had done and feel somewhat displeased even yet."

"I suppose," Brinnaria ruminated, "you mean my larruping Bambilio."

"Yes," Aurelius admitted. "That was in a sense unforgivable. Had I been in Rome at the time I must have animadverted upon it with the greatest severity."

"If you had been in Rome at the time," spoke Brinnaria boldly, "I should not have been flogged by any mere deputy Pontifex of Vesta. It would have been incumbent upon you, as Pontifex Maximus, yourself to give me my ceremonial scourging. To you I should have been, of course, as submissive after my beating as while it was going on. No harm would have been done."

The Emperor smiled more than a half smile.

"I am not sure," he said, "that any harm was done, anyhow."

"What!" cried Brinnaria. "You excuse me? You defend me?"

"Softly! Softly!" the Emperor caveatted, raising his hand. "I do not acquit you nor exonerate you. But I do make allowances. And we must distinguish. We must not confuse the causes of my disapprobation of what you did with my reasons for believing that no harm resulted. Nor, for that matter, must we confound with either of them those qualities in yourself and those

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circumstances of the case which make me feel, illogically perhaps, but very possibly, more inclined to thank you than to censure you."

"Castor be good to me!" cried Brinnaria. "Am I dreaming?"

"Don't interrupt, you disrespectful minx," the Emperor laughed; "this is a lecture. Hear it out.

"In the first place you were technically right in saying that there is not one word in any sacred writing or in the pronouncements of the Pontiffs or the statutes of the Vestals to forbid a flogged Vestal from beating her scourger. Just as Solon in the code of laws which he drew up for the Athenians prescribed no penalty for the slayer of his father or mother, because, as he explained when the omission was pointed out to him, he had thought that no child would ever kill its parents; so no framer of rubrics ever foresaw the necessity of forbidding what no one conceived of as possible. All persons were assumed to be too much in awe of Pontiffs, for any one to dare to raise a hand against any Pontiff, least of all a Vestal against her spiritual father. The world had to wait for a Brinnaria to demonstrate that the unimaginable could come to pass.

"Yet the very fact that it was nowhere written down that you must not do it makes your act all the worse. It was monstrous.

"But fortunately it was not sacrilegious. The person of the Pontifex of Vesta is not sacrosanct and a blow inflicted on him is not to be rated as impious. Your act called for no expiation, personal or official. It did not desecrate him, or you, nor the place where it occurred.

"Besides, I cannot resist admitting to you,"—and the Emperor smiled an unmistakable smile—"that this par-

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ticular Pontiff of Vesta is farther from being sacrosanct than any of his predecessors. As far as I can learn, Faltonius is a worthy man, pious and scrupulous. But he is absurdly unfitted for his office in appearance and in manner. The self-importance he assumes, the pomposity with which he performs his duties, would be too great even for an Emperor. He irritates all of us. All of us have wished, secretly or openly, many, many times, that Bambilio would be soundly thrashed. He has been. You did it. The story was too good to keep. It has not, of course, been allowed to leak out, and become common property. But it is known to all the Flamens, Augurs and Pontiffs.

"I need not describe to you the feelings of my colleagues, nor my own. To hint them is perhaps too much; to particularize them would be unseemly. I may say, however, that just as street-boys acclaim you by shouting:

"'That's the girl that saved the dog;' just as all over the Empire you are talked of as the lady who rescued the retiarius; so at any festival or ceremonial in which the Vestals take part, many a dignitary is likely to nudge his neighbor, indicate you and whisper: 'That's the priestess who walloped Bambilio!' You are not infamous, you are famous.

"As for myself I am the more inclined to feel indulgent towards you because I understand how you felt. You were boiling with rage at being struck by any one, as any noble girl would be. Yet you would have controlled your fury but for the fact that you knew that you yourself had done nothing to deserve chastisement, that you were suffering for another's fault."

"What!" cried Brinnaria.

"Oh, yes," Aurelius continued, easily. "Causidiena

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and I are quite agreed on that point. Neither she nor I have questioned Meffia, and we do not mean to; partly because we are sure enough, without any admission from her; partly because the matter is best left as it is, without any further notice. But, with the exception of Meffia, it is quite certain that, from the Vestals themselves down to the last slave-girl, every resident of the Atrium believes that not you but Meffia let the fire go out, and that you took the blame due her. And we can all conjecture your motives, as we all applaud them. Meffia might never have survived a scourging, might have been ailing for months. Rome wants no sick Vestals nor dead Vestals. Causidiena is grateful to you, all the Atrium is grateful, I am grateful."

"But," said Brinnaria, wide-eyed, "I had supposed that, if Meffia was suspected, there would be an inquisition and testimony under oath and that it would be obligatory that the Vestal actually at fault must be scourged."

"For once," the Emperor smiled, "you have failed to read accurately the statutes of the order. It is positively refreshing. I was beginning to feel that you were altogether too accurate. In fact the scourging of a delinquent Vestal is a mere disciplinary regulation, designed to assure the maintenance of the fire. It is not in the nature of a mandatory atonement. It has nothing in common with an act of expiation. It has nothing to do with placating or propitiating the Goddess. It has no likeness whatever to the punishment of a guilty Vestal."

"That reminds me," said Brinnaria, "of what I came for. I'm as grateful as possible for what you have said to me, surprised that Causidiena and you so easily saw through my deception, delighted that you take it as

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you have, more than delighted to find you so kindly disposed towards me. I need all the kindness you can feel towards me. I want to come to the point, to the reason why I am here. I want you to answer me this question:—

"Suppose I were accused of the worst possible misconduct, formally accused before you, what then?"

"Then," said Aurelius, "you would have a fair trial."

"I believe I should," said Brinnaria. "You would be perfectly fair and entirely just. And a fair trial would be a novelty. Almost never has an accused Vestal had a fair trial."

"Not even if acquitted?" the Emperor suggested slyly.

"No," Brinnaria retorted vigorously. "Even most of those absolved were not tried fairly. Postumia was, if the records from so long ago are to be trusted. The first trial of the third Licinia was perfectly fair, the minutes are very full and there is no shade of bias in the discussion of her many interviews with Crassus, while the court was plainly genuinely amused at his greed for desirable real-estate and at his artifices to induce her to sell cheap. Fabia, in the same year, was justly treated. But most of the other acquittals were quite as bad as most of the convictions, to my mind. I can discover almost no trial where both sides had a full hearing, where the judges tried to get at the facts and kept their attention on the evidence, where the finding was the expression of the opinions rather than of the partiality of the Pontiffs. Almost every verdict on record, it seems to me, was dictated by favoritism or influence or prejudice or wrath."

"You seem to think you know a great deal about the subject of trials of Vestals," Aurelius remarked.

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"I feel justified in thinking so," Brinnaria maintained. "Where the minutes of the court have perished, as, of course, in the case of all the trials before the capture and burning of the city by the Gauls, I have read what records remain. Where the court-records are extant I have pored over every word of the minutes of the proceedings and of every document attached."

"That is more than ever I found time to do," Aurelius meditated. "Your conclusions ought to be of interest. What are they?"

Brinnaria drew a deep breath and went on. "I am convinced," she said, "that sometimes the accused received what she deserved, but generally by accident. The judges were swayed by politics or expediency or clan-feeling or popular clamor or self-interest, not by reason.

"Nobody could form any judgment, at this distance of time, about the guilt or innocence of Oppia or Opimia or Popilia or Porphilia or Orbilia or Orbinia or whatever her real name was, it all happened so long ago. But Minucia and Sextilia and Florinia and the rest were just victims of judicial ferocity, as far as I can make out."

"You are then of the opinion," the Emperor asked, "that there never was a guilty Vestal?"

"No," Brinnaria replied judicially, "I don't go as far as that. Varonilla was probably depraved and with her the two Oculatas. I don't think their suicides prove anything against them, for a woman is just as likely to hang herself because she despairs of a fair hearing as because she is conscious of guilt. What weighs with me is that they were brought up in the dissolute times of Messalina and Nero and that their relatives were leaders of the most profligate set in Rome, cronies of

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Vitellius and his coterie. But although Cornelia was bred and raised in the same social atmosphere, I am quite as sure of her innocence as all the world was the day she was buried and as everybody has been ever since. Domitian just murdered her without a trial, for political reasons and for moral effect. So likewise Marcia and the second Licinia were judicially murdered by that fierce old Cassius Longinus Ravilla. He was elected to convict them, not to try them, and he conducted the trial not to arrive at a fair verdict, but to force a conviction. He had some excuse, for their acquittal on their former trial had been brought about by idiotic bribing and family influence. On the face of the evidence at both trials they were clearly blameless. What ruined them was their trying to shield Aurelia, surely the worst Vestal on record, for she had everything in her favor, ancestry, upbringing and surroundings; she was beyond doubt innately vicious. She was the only Vestal ever justly convicted and justly punished, in my opinion. All the others were irreproachable women, doomed to a frightful fate by prejudiced judges. In general, an accused Vestal is as good as condemned, the whole population so dreads the results of acquitting an unclean priestess. And it is the easiest thing in the world for a Vestal to be accused. Refuse to sell a farm for half its value, snub a bore, order a slave flogged for some unbearable blunder, and the result is the same; false accusation with perjured witnesses and a quick conviction most likely to follow."

"The subject seems to have occupied your mind a great deal," Aurelius ruminated.

"Do you wonder?" Brinnaria flamed at him. "What in all the tragic, dramatic history of Rome is half so dramatic or a tenth so tragic as the burial of a Vestal?

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In all our centuries of ferocity, what seems half so cruel?

"I know that cruelty played no part in the invention of burial alive as a punishment for a convicted Vestal. I know that no caitiff could be found so vile as to dare to lay hands on a Vestal, no ruffian so reckless as to venture to end her life by sword or axe, by strangling or drowning. The most impious miscreant has too much fear of the gods to injure a consecrated priestess. The only way to dispose of a delinquent Vestal is to bury her alive. But the cruelty of it makes me choke. I think of the last hours of each of those who were punished, of their thoughts as the time drew near, of their feelings alone in the dark waiting for death to release them from their sufferings.

"I think of these underground cells as they are now, out there under that awful unkempt, ragged waste lot by the Colline Gate. I think of the skeletons mouldering on the mouldering cots, of the bones, the fragments of crumbling bones, the dust of crumbled bones on the stone floors, as they have been for hundreds of years, as they will be for thousands of years to come. The cot cannot yet have decayed from under what is left of poor Cornelia; her bones must still be entire and in order on the webbing; Aurelia's bones must be whole yet and Licinia's and Marcia's; of Floronia there can hardly be left a trace by now, where Minucia died there can be only an empty stone cell. Do you wonder that the subject haunts me?"

"I do and I do not," Aurelius replied. "I've let you relieve your mind by talking yourself tired. Now listen to me. I think I understand you perfectly. When you came to me before the novel responsibilities of your office had worn on your nerves and you were quivering

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with dread for fear you might be an unworthy priestess. Now the perils of your situation are wearing on your nerves and you are brooding over the possibility of accusation, trial, conviction and burial alive.

"I sympathize with you. As an Emperor I am exposed to the perpetual danger of assassination. You would be amazed if I detailed to you my various narrow escapes from death at the hands of disappointed seekers after preferment, of incompetent officials, of knaves with grievances of every conceivable and inconceivable variety and of fools with no grievance at all. You would be astonished if I merely reckoned the occasions on which I have just missed being killed. It gets on my nerves, more or less, of course. But I strive to bear up and remain calm and I succeed more or less. I keep before me the fact that as an Emperor I am obnoxious to countless hatreds from fancied slights and to uncountable schemes of revenge. I reflect that the danger is inseparable from the state of my being an Emperor. I try to be philosophical about it.

"So you must attempt to remain placid under the strain of the knowledge that you are exposed to perpetual danger of a horrible death from conviction on false accusation. It is part of the condition of being a Vestal. If anything goes wrong in the way of earthquake, flood, famine, pestilence, conflagrations or defeats, the populace are likely to cry out that some Vestal is unclean and bringing down on the Empire the wrath of the gods. That nothing of the kind has occurred during our recent afflictions has been clearly due to the holiness of Dossonia and Causidiena and to their reputation for strict discipline. But the danger of popular outcry is always real. Then there is the fact that far too large a proportion of our population

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are dissolute and that, among the dissolute-minded, all Vestals are under suspicion because they are the only women among our nobility who remain unmarried long after they have reached marriageable years. You must learn to take all this as a matter of course and to go sedately about your duties.

"Of course, I lessen my danger by keeping about me many trusty guards. It is right that you should appeal to me in your anxiety. I shall do what I can to lessen your danger. I believe in you. If you were accused before me it would take notably plain and convincing evidence to make me believe anything against you. I shall put my opinion of you on record among my papers of instructions to my successor. I shall declare it to all the Chief Pontiffs. I shall verbally and in writing make it clear to all concerned that you seem to me all you should be, that you are in an unusually difficult and delicate position and that in case of accusation all presumption should be in favor of your innocence and against the sincerity of your accusers.

"And now I think that ought to satisfy you and cover all the general considerations. Let us come to the special consideration that interests me chiefly. You have never come to me because you became gradually unnerved by brooding which had no specific origin or cause:

"Tell me plainly and outspokenly what has happened to you lately to fill your mind with thoughts of buried Vestals, trials, accusations and terrors?"

Brinnaria thereupon related her encounter with Calvaster and her conversation with Flexinna.

The Emperor stroked his beard and reflected.

"I have never liked Calvaster," he said, "and if I had been in the city to consider recommendations for

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appointments he would, assuredly, never have become a member of Rome's hierarchy. I deem him gravely unsuited for even the most minor grade of Pontiff. He appears to me to be mean-spirited, narrow-minded and base. I am inclined to believe of him all that you impute. But, even to such as Calvaster, we should be just. You complained, a while ago, that the judges of the Vestals had ignored both the facts and the evidence. Let us weigh the evidence and stick to the facts. The only fact you present is that you caught Calvaster lurking in your house. You confess that you were completely puzzled as to what motive brought him there. Your friend surmises an explanation which disgusts, insults and alarms you. You instantly credit it completely, think and act as if it were unquestionably true. I am prejudiced against Calvaster, as I have told you, yet I am by no means ready to admit that your beliefs about him are evidence against him, more particularly as they rest solely on Flexinna's ingenious conjectures. The notion is plausible and it is entirely congruent with Calvaster's character as I imagine it. Yet it is, after all, merely a plausible surmise. I am just as inclined to accept Calvaster's own explanation; he is an inquisitive busybody.

"My verdict is that you need feel no alarm."

"But I do," Brinnaria maintained; "I do not feel safe with Calvaster anywhere about."

The Emperor reflected.

"The peace of mind of a Vestal," he said, "is a matter of such importance to the state that I should not hesitate about ordering Calvaster banished to some comfortable and healthy island and there detained permanently, were it not that the fellow has made himself almost indispensable. The pestilence has carried off

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practically all the adepts at interpretation of the sacred writings, the prophetic books, the rubrics and rituals of the various temples, the statutes of the brotherhoods and other orders of the hierarchy. Only Numerius Aproniarius remains of the older experts, and he is afflicted by an incurable and loathsome disease which he cannot long survive. Of the younger men only Calvaster has displayed any aptitude for learning this delicate and complex art, only he has attained any reputation. He is, in the circumstances, indispensable. I cannot banish him merely to please you. You will have to endure Calvaster."

Brinnaria pulled a wry face, as in her mutinous girlhood. She felt entirely at ease with Aurelius.

"I perceive that I must endure him," she said, "but if you cannot banish Calvaster, perhaps you'll oblige me by banishing Almo."

"Almo!" the Emperor exclaimed, "what can you have against that gallant lad? Have you turned against him? I thought you were unshakably resolved to marry him, thought you loved him unalterably!"

"I shall marry him, if we both live," Brinnaria replied, "and I most unalterably love him. But I love life and daylight and fresh air and my full meals even more. I have a splendid appetite, I loath stuffy places, I hate the dark. The idea of being shut in an underground cell to suffocate slowly or starve to death even more slowly goes against my gorge. I see myself in my mind's eye climbing down that ladder, like poor Cornelia, I see myself stretched out on my cot, watching the ladder being pulled up by the executioner, watching the workmen fitting in the last stone of the vault. I imagine myself staring at the wick of the lamp and wondering how long the oil will last and debating

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whether it would be better to blow out the light and save the oil to drink and so live longer in the dark, or to let the lamp burn out and have the discomfort of the light a little longer. I fancy myself conning over the trifle of bread, milk, fruit and wine left on the stone slab, and speculating as to how long they'll keep me alive.

"Bah!

"No burial alive for me.

"Acquittal on a trial is a poor way for a Vestal to escape the worst possible fate, a last resort, at best, and an unchancy reliance, even as a last resort. A far better way is never to be tried, and the best way never to be tried is never to be accused. You've been good enough to tell me that if I were accused you'd be predisposed to favor me in all possible ways and that you'll give instructions as to your opinion of me. Any directions of yours would be respected by any heir of yours. But you yourself have just remarked how slender is an Emperor's hold on life or on power. I may survive both yourself and your son. I might be tried before men we should never think of now. I must arrange so that I shall never be tried at all, I must live so that I shall never be accused.

"Now I am unlikely ever to be accused in relation to any man except Almo. Everybody knows I mean to marry Almo when my service is at an end, everybody knows he means to marry me, everybody knows we are in love with each other. That puts me in the most delicate position any Vestal ever was placed in. I have been extremely careful. I have never spoken to Almo since I was taken for a Vestal, have never met him except by accident, have never set eyes on him except against my will; have never even written a letter to him

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or received one from him. I have been, I think, wise, judicious and controlled. But Almo has not behaved well towards me."

"Indeed!" Aurelius interjected. "You surprise me! What has he done?"

Brinnaria flushed.

"A girl in love," she said, "is a fool, but she has sense enough to conceal her foolishness. A man is different. I suppose men are made that way and can't help themselves. But a man in love is not only a fool, but he parades his foolishness. Almo sent me messages by all sorts of mutual acquaintances, by his people and mine, by Flexinna, by Nemestronia, by Vocco, begging me to exchange letters with him. I was angry and said so and repeatedly sent him word that he was most foolish and most inconsiderate. I sent him word that if he wanted to please me he'd ignore my existence and stay as far from me as possible.

"He actually begged his father to be allowed to come to Rome. His father had the good sense to keep him at Falerii. Now that all his relatives are dead and he is his own master he has come to Rome. If he had any real consideration for me he'd go to Aquileia, at least he might be satisfied with a popular resort like Baiæ or a place like Capua; Capua has enough baths and shows and horse-races and gladiators for anybody.

"But he must come to Rome, when a spark of sense and decency would tell him to keep as far away as he could. It stands to reason that I could never be accused of misconduct with him if he had never been within a hundred miles of me since I was taken for a Vestal.

"But he must needs come to Rome. He has opened his house on the Carinæ and had it put in order and has settled down to such a life here as is usual with

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wealthy leisured idlers. He has bought additional furniture, as if his father's house wasn't stuffed with everything magnificent, he has bought curios and antiques and statuary and pictures and books. He spends most of his time in the barracks of his favorite gladiatorial company or at the stables of the Greens, and the rest of it at the afternoon baths. I sent Vocco to him to protest and to urge him to leave Rome for my sake. The selfish wretch said he loved me and always would, but he just could not live anywhere except at Rome. He stays here, in defiance of my wishes and against all reason."

"That is not what I should have expected of him," the Emperor meditated. "I am surprised and far from pleased. I shall certainly find means to relieve your mind as far as he is concerned."

"There is worse yet to tell," Brinnaria went on. "You'd think that, if he must stay in Rome he'd at least have the decency to keep away from me and from places where he is likely to encounter me. He does just the reverse. He haunts me, he waylays me. He prowls up and down the Via Sacra and the Via Nova, he stands in the moonlight and stares up at the outside windows of the Atrium; on festival days he waits outside of our entrance to the Colosseum or of the Circus Maximus to watch me enter; on any day he loiters about the portal of the Atrium to watch me come out to my litter or my carriage, he dogs me on my airings."

"Hercules!" Aurelius exclaimed. "This is too bad!"

"Too bad indeed," Brinnaria pursued; "it would be bad enough from anybody in his position, from him it is ten times worse than from any one else. You know how individual Almo is, how almost peculiar he looks, how no one would mistake him for any one else or

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forget him or fail to recognize him. I have often tried to analyze the factors that go to make him look so striking, but I cannot. He is perfectly proportioned in every measurement, yet, somehow, he has a long-armed and long-legged appearance different from that of any young man in Rome, he gives almost the effect of reminding one of a spider or of a grasshopper or of a daddy-long-legs. It makes him the most conspicuous, the most recognizable man in all Rome. Why, if your son were to mingle in a crowd, habited like any other boy in that crowd and Almo did the same, and nobody in the crowd had any reason to expect to see either, Almo would most likely be noticed sooner than Antoninus, recognized more generally, more readily, further off and quicker."

"You are right," Aurelius mused, "I never thought of that, but Almo is unforgettable, striking and arresting to the eye beyond any lad in our nobility."

"And being what he is," Brinnaria raged, "he must needs arrange that nearly every crowd I am in should see him at the same time as me. Already thousands of reputable Romans must remember seeing us at the same glance. Before long the majority will be ready to recall, if the subject is broached, that they have habitually seen him wherever they saw me. Some one will start the talk and presently all Rome will buzz with the gossip that we are continually seen together. A charming state of affairs for me if some busybody or some enemy of mine raises the question of my fitness for my holy duties! I have protested. I've had Vocco go to Almo and urge all these considerations on him, and the silly boy says he can't live without seeing me, that he longs for the sight of me so he cannot control himself. How's that for lover's folly? One minute

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he can't live away from Rome, he loves Rome more than he loves me; the next minute I'm the one object on earth which he must behold or die. I've no patience with such imbecility."

"And I have very little," said the Emperor; "just enough to imagine a better way of disburdening you and of disposing of Almo than banishing him would be. The lad is far too good to be wasting his time with the horse-jockeys and charioteers and ostlers of the Greens, or brutalizing himself with the companionship of ruffianly prize-fighters, belonging to this or that speculator in the flesh of ferocious savages. He must find some outlet for his energies and interests and is carried away by the fashionable mania, which is corrupting our whole population, especially our young nobles, and which, even at his tender age, fills the thoughts of my son, to the despair of his tutors.

"All Almo needs is worthy occupation. I'll put the sea between him and you and so put your mind at rest. I'll make a man of him at the same time. I'll appeal to his pride and his patriotism. Rome needs such keen-minded, capable youths on the frontiers. I'll not give him too hard or too unpleasant employment, not relegate him to Britain or Dacia or Syria. I'll send him to Africa to chase the desert nomads who are harrying the borders of Numidia and Mauretania. He can gain credit there without danger, can learn to command men and to know the great game of war. Nepte and Bescera are pleasant little cities—he will be comfortable between campaigns. I'll see he sets out the day after to-morrow, at latest."

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CHAPTER XI

FAREWELL

TWO days later, Brinnaria had a visit from Flexinna. Flexinna's eyes were dancing.

"G-G-Guess where I've been," she challenged.

"I'm not good at guessing," Brinnaria parried; "better tell me."

"I've b-b-been to the Palace," Flexinna revealed.

"What took you there?" Brinnaria queried, surprised.

"I was sent for," Flexinna declared, elated.

"Who'd you see?" Brinnaria enquired.

"The Emperor himself," proclaimed Flexinna triumphantly.

Brinnaria was very much astonished.

"Better tell me the whole story," she suggested.

"Not much story," said Flexinna. "Aurelius t-t-told me that he wanted t-t-to see you again and that, as a formal visit from the Emperor as P-P-Pontifex Maximus at the Atrium was unusual and was likely to c-c-cause g-g-gossip, whereas you Vestals are c-c-continually at the Palace to ask favors for all sorts of people who p-p-pester you to use your influence with the Emperor, he thought it b-b-best to suggest that you apply for an audience t-t-to-morrow. He said he wanted the intimation c-c-conveyed to you as unobtrusively as p-p-possible and d-d-desired p-p-particularly that no one should ever know or g-g-guess that it had b-b-been

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g-g-given. So he sent for me, as your b-b-best friend, since he was sure I would never t-t-tell anybody.

"B-B-Better send along your application for an audience. It was p-p-plain to me that he has something agreeable to t-t-tell you. His face was just as g-g-grave as usual but his eyes sparkled at me, as d-d-different as p-p-possible from their habitual dull filmed appearance. He was all k-k-kindliness and anticipation."

"I'm willing to take the hint, of course," Brinnaria replied.

Next morning she found Aurelius most cordial and informal in his greeting to her.

"I've been investigating Almo," he said, "and I am more than pleased with all I can learn of him. I see no reason for not telling you that, from the very day you were taken as a Vestal, some of the most expert, secret and trustworthy men in the employ of the information department have had no other duties than to keep close watch upon you and Almo. I have been over all the papers relating to him and to you, I have talked with the men themselves. They all assure me that never once have you and Almo met since he reached your father's house a half hour too late. They also report that, in the course of his injudicious moonings about your haunts, he has always kept at a respectful distance. And except for those same loverly danglings about places where he might catch glimpses of you, I can find nothing against the lad. Everybody speaks most highly of him. His former tutors and preceptors are enthusiastic in their laudations of his capacities, abilities, diligence and attainments in all matters pertaining to books and study. About Falerii he was regarded as a fine specimen of a young nobleman, huntsman and swimmer, good at all rustic sports, as haughty

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as the proudest when he was given good cause to assert himself, but habitually affable, unassuming and sunny-tempered. Towards his father's tenants and slaves he was most kindly and nothing could be more to any man's credit than his downright heroic behavior from the very day the pestilence appeared on his estates, all through the frightful period of its raging about Falerii, until the neighborhood had somewhat recovered after the plague had abated.

"The most extraordinary feature of the reports about him is that they all agree as to his amazing devotion to you. All persons who know him or know of him are unanimous in the opinion that he has never taken the slightest personal interest in any human-being except yourself; all are emphatic in stating that he has certainly never manifested any affection for any one else. This is unprecedented. I never heard of such another case. There is nothing astonishing about a young Roman declaring that he would remain unmarried for thirty years in order to mate, ultimately, with the girl of his choice. There is nothing wonderful about his keeping his word. But any other youth I ever heard of would have consoled himself variously, and variedly. Almo's austere celibacy is a portent in our world and altogether marvellous. It lifts his affair with you out of the humdrum atmosphere of to-day and puts it on a level with the legendary stories of heroic times, with the life-long fidelities of the Milesian tales.

"Under the stress of such severe and unflinching self-isolation I do not wonder that his broodings drove him to overstep the bounds of commonsense, that he was irresistibly compelled to leave Falerii, to come to Rome, to loiter where he might, at least, behold you at a distance. I shall make sure that he does so no longer.

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This very day he sets out for Carthage, Theveste and the deserts to the south beyond the lagoons of Nepte. But I cannot be angry with him for being unable to restrain his longing at least to set eyes on you. And I see no reason why you two, who have not exchanged a word in more than nine years, should not meet here in this room and say farewell to each other before I put the Mediterranean between you."

Brinnaria sprang up.

"I see many reasons," she declared, "and my feelings are all against seeing Almo until my service as a Vestal is ended."

"I can well believe," came the answer, "that you feel that way at the first presentation of the idea. But I am your Emperor and also Chief Pontiff of Rome. I am engaged at present in solving the problem of how best to ensure peace of mind to one of Rome's Vestals. To ensure her peace of mind I am about to relegate her future husband to important duties on a far frontier of the Empire. I judge that he will better perform his duties, that she will better perform hers, if she bids him farewell in my presence. I am a lover of wisdom and a student of wisdom. I believe I possess some pretensions to wisdom. Will you not defer to me in this? I am of the opinion that he will worry less about you and you less about him if you see each other once before your twenty years of certain separation begins."

Brinnaria looked mutinous and gazed at the Emperor in silence. In silence he waited for her to speak. At last she said, curtly:

"I bow to your authority."

The Emperor struck his silver gong and a page appeared. Aurelius gave a brief order. A few moments later Almo was ushered in. After his formal salute

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to the Emperor he stood silent, his eyes fixed on Brinnaria.

They made a fine picture. The ceiling of the immense hall was a barrel-vault, of which the beams were stuccoed in cream-white, picked out with gilding, while between them the depth of each soffit was colored an intense deep blue, against which stood out a great gilt rosette. The mighty pilasters, whose gilded capitals supported the vaulting, were of many-veined dark yellow marble, polished and gleaming like the slabs of pale yellow marble which panelled the interspaces. The high-moulded wainscot was of red and green porphyry, somberly smooth and shining. Against it, below the wall-panels, were set great chests of carved and gilded wood, while about the bases of the pilasters were placed groups of settees and armchairs, similarly carved and gilded and richly upholstered. The floor was paved with an intricate mosaic of party-colored bits of marble, its expanse broken only by the great gorgeous carpet before the throne, by the chair set for Brinnaria, by the onyx table, supported on sculptured monsters like griffons, beside the throne, and by the throne itself, a curule seat of ivory mounted with gold, its crimson cushion glowing, set far out in the room.

Before the throne stood Aurelius, his head bare, the long ringlets of his hair and beard sweeping his shoulders and his bosom, one foot a trifle advanced, the gold eagle embroidered on his sky-blue buskin showing beneath the crimson silk robes, lavishly embroidered with a complicated pattern of winding vines, bright blue and green, edged with gold, which the etiquette of the time imposed upon even a philosophically austere Emperor; on his right Brinnaria, erect and tense in her white official habit, her square white headdress all but

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hiding her coronet of dark braids, her veil pushed back from her flushed face; the tassels and ribbons of her head-band, her great pearl necklace, the big pearl brooch that fastened the folds of her headdress where they crossed on her breast, and the bunch of fresh white flowers which it clasped, rising and falling with the heaving of her bosom; facing her, splendid in the gilded armor and scarlet cloak of a commander of irregular cavalry, Almo.

"You know why I have sent for you," Aurelius reminded him. "Speak out."

Like a school-boy repeating a lesson by rote Almo spoke.

"Brinnaria," he said, "the Emperor has remonstrated with me on my recent folly. I am sincerely ashamed of myself and I wish to apologize to you for my lack of self-control and for my lack of consideration for you. I leave Rome before sunset and shall not return until I may return without danger to you."

Aurelius looked at Brinnaria.

"Caius," she said, "I forgive you. I trust that you will win promotion and honor where you are going and I am sure that you will do your duty to the Empire. May the blessing of all the gods be on you and may you return to me safe and well."

"And may I find you safe and well when I return," spoke Almo. "Farewell, Brinnaria."

"Farewell, Caius," said she.

The Emperor nodded and Almo bowed himself out.

"Do you know," said Aurelius, when they were alone, "I have been thinking over what you said about Almo's peculiar notability of looks. It puzzles me as it puzzles you. He is not merely of distinguished appearance, he is unusual, striking, unforgettable, con-

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spicuous. I have talked about it to several of my gentlemen-in-waiting, equerries and orderlies. They have seen him lately about the stables of the Greens. They all say that he is, in fact, as normally proportioned as any youth alive, but they confirm what you said about his long-legged appearance. Julianus used almost the same word you used, said Almo looked 'Grasshoppery.' They all say Almo is precisely the most unmistakable, the most readily and quickly recognizable youth in all our young nobility."

Brinnaria rose to go. Aurelius bent on her a kindly smile.

"I have been talking about you with Faustina," he said. "We are both much interested by the strangeness of your fate, by the difficulty and delicacy of your situation and by the wonderful constancy of you both. Faustina and I are a most united pair, never happy out of each other's company and very proud of our domestic felicity. We are, if I may use the word, rather prone to gloat over it, and, while continually congratulating ourselves and each other, we cannot but mourn the infrequency of such happiness throughout our Italian nobility. There are few matrons in Rome as serenely happy as your friend Flexinna, few indeed who find all their happiness in children, husband and household. And of those who really enjoy their homes most are remarried after a divorce, or even after two or more. Our society suffers from a plague worse than the pestilence itself, a plague of greed for excitement, eagerness for novelty, of peevishness and fickleness.

"In this unhealthy atmosphere such households as Vocco's are most notable. And that you, who seem by nature fitted for just such blessedness as has befallen Flexinna, should have been robbed of it by a strange

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series of peculiar circumstances wins for you our interest and our solicitude. Still more are our hearts drawn towards you by your unwavering fidelity, alike to your present duties and all that they imply and to that love which you have had to put away and forget, to the ideal of that felicity which you have had to postpone so far.

"Faustina desires an interview with you. She is now in the amber gallery. I shall have you conducted there, if you do not object."

Brinnaria could not very well object and after an equerry, very stately in his garb of duty, and two gaudily clad pages had escorted her through what seemed like miles of corridors, she found herself alone with the Empress.

The Empress she had so far seen infrequently and spoken with only seldom. It was impossible to be a Vestal, in the heyday of Rome's Imperial times, and not meet and know the Empress of Rome. Brinnaria had seen her whenever they were both present at the Circus or the Amphitheatre; had been close to her at all important state functions; had occasionally dined with her at formal Palace banquets, when the curved sofa about the Empress' table was always occupied by the Empress, the wives of the chief Flamens and the Vestals; but had hardly ever exchanged a word with her.

Faustina was endowed with the general healthiness with which Roman noblewomen were blessed. But she had had the bad luck to suffer from many and severe illnesses. These and her slow recoveries from them had kept her away from very many official functions and public festivals. Numerous had been the occasions on which Aurelius had appeared without her. When she was well, indeed, they were always together, if pos-

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sible. A great proportion of his time, however, was occupied with official duties of such a nature that, according to Roman etiquette, no woman could participate in them. During such enforced separations Faustina sought amusement. And with the overflowing energy and abounding vigor which she displayed between her illness, she threw herself into the wihrl of her pleasures with such impetuosity, there was so much rollicking and roistering about her favorite diversions that she attracted to herself and kept around her just those elements of Roman society with which the Vestals were least likely to mingle, professional idlers, and what we moderns would call the fast set. Naturally, therefore, Brinnaria and Faustina had never had any familiar intercourse. This was their first real conversation.

Faustina was not a large woman. She was of medium height, slender and graceful. She was noted for the originality of her coiffures, which made the most of her magnificent hair. Her hair Brinnaria noticed the moment her eyes fell on her.

Her habitual expression of haughtiness and boredom had vanished from the Empress' face and she was all kindliness and solicitude.

Faustina put her at her ease at once.

"I have always been so sorry," she began, "that I was ill the day you climbed over the balustrade of the podium and rescued the retiarius. I've missed many a sight I regretted, I miss so much by falling ill again and again, but I never missed a sight I regretted missing more than that. Nothing more worth seeing ever happened in the Colosseum."

"I was terribly ashamed when I found what I had done," said Brinnaria.

"Of course you were," the Empress agreed.

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This broke the ice between them and Faustina led her into a long talk about all her past, her love affair, her life as a Vestal, her bereavements, her embarrassing circumstances, her future, her hopes.

Brinnaria left the Empress, feeling that she had found a real friend and also feeling comforted at heart.

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CHAPTER XII

OBSERVANCES

BRINNARIA found that, with Almo definitely and permanently out of the way, she did not worry about Calvaster. She also found that she did not worry about Almo and that her glimpse of him had rather calmed her feelings. She confessed as much to Aurelius when she had a third audience with him before he left for the Rhine frontier, and she thanked him for his insistence.

With her mind at peace Brinnaria settled more and more into the routine of her life and enjoyed it more and more.

She came to feel keenly the spiritual significance of every detail of the ritual observances in which she took part. Besides the maintenance of the sacred fire, the Vestals had many obligatory duties. Every sacrifice of the Roman public worship involved the sprinkling of the sacred meal upon the head of the victim, if a live animal was offered, or upon the fire, if the sacrifice was bloodless. Early in each ceremony one of the small boys assisting the priest carried around to all the participants in the act of worship a maple-wood box containing the holy meal; from it each worshipper ladled a small portion into the palm of his right hand; at a specified point in the course of the ceremonial each participant sprinkled the meal as prescribed.

The holy meal was made of very coarsely ground

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wheat, a sort of grits, salted and toasted. It was prepared by the Vestals according to immemorial custom. They were supplied with a sufficient quantity of heads of wheat, the best of the produce of two of their estates, one near Cære, the other near Lanuvium. These wheat ears were packed in baskets and stored on the farms in dry, airy barns. There they were kept drying and hardening their grains until the next spring. Then the allotted baskets were brought into Rome. On the seventh of May, after a ceremonial of prayer, the three elder Vestals began going over these wheat-ears, sorting out those entirely perfect, and placing them in larger baskets shaped like the big earthen jars in which the Romans commonly stored wheat, olives, oil, wine and other similar supplies. On the next day the wheat from the first day's selection of ears was separated from the straw, beards and chaff, was roasted and coarsely ground. The resultant groats were then put away in great earthen jars in the outer storeroom of the temple. On the third day they again selected wheat ears, on the fourth they again prepared wheat-grits, and so on alternately for eight days. By the evening of the eighth day they had stored enough groats to make the sacred meal for one year's ceremonies of the entire Roman ritual.

The salt with which they salted the holy meal was prepared with similar invariable formality. Crude salt, obtained from evaporated sea-water out of the sand-pits on the seashore near Lavinium, was conveyed to the Atrium in small two-handled earthenware jars. This coarse, dirty, dark-colored salt was dissolved by the three younger Vestals in boiling water, which water might not be obtained from the lead pipes which connected the Atrium with the general water-supply of the

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city's aqueducts, but must be drawn by the Vestals themselves and carried by them in the earthenware jars from the famous fountain of Jaturna, at which Castor and Pollux were fabled to have watered their white horses after bringing to Rome the news of the victory at Lake Regillus. The solution was purified by repeated boilings, the impurities being gotten rid of by successive careful decantings of the liquid from one vessel into another, so that the sediment might be left behind as the top part was poured off. When sufficiently boiled down the solution was recrystallized in shallow earthenware pans. The resulting slabs of salt were harder than the pans and were freed from them by breaking the earthenware with an ancient stone hammer, said to have been captured by Æneas himself from a king of Ardea. The slabs of salt were sawed into pieces with an iron saw, the pieces were pounded in a mortar, the fine salt was thrown into an earthenware bowl and dried out in a kiln. When dried a little powdered gypsum was stirred through it to prevent it from again becoming moist. It was then stored in a tall jar with a tight lid, which was kept in the outer storeroom of the temple, along with the jars of meal.

Three times a year, on the ninth of June, on the thirteenth of September and on the fifteenth of February, with solemn prayers the Vestals mixed the prepared salt with the prepared grits, the resultant mixture being the sacred meal.

On each First of March the fire in the temple was allowed to go out and was solemnly rekindled by the friction of maple wood on apple wood, as when the fire went out by accident. The temple was then decorated with fresh boughs of green laurel, after the boughs put up the year before had been removed.

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On May fifteenth the Vestals were the chief figures in a solemn procession of the entire Roman hierarchy to the Sublician bridge, from which the Vestals threw into the Tiber thirty dolls made of rushes, fifteen representing men, fifteen women, each about two feet high. This offering to the river of effigies of men and women commemorated the primitive human sacrifices by which the river was each year placated, that it might not drown more by floods.

On June fifth the inner storeroom of the temple was opened and its treasures inspected by the Pontifex wearing his antique vestments. With him entered always also the Chief Vestal clad in her austere habit with all her badges of office. They were attended by the other Vestals, who went through traditional pacings, haltings and prayers. The Temple of Vesta was an enclosure from which all men were rigidly excluded. The only exceptions to this immemorial taboo were a few of the more important Pontiffs, and they might only enter on specified festal days, and then must be in their full regalia. Also, in general, the temple was closed against all women except the Vestals and their assistants. It was open, however, from sunrise on the morning of each seventh of June until sunset on the evening of the fourteenth of June. During this period it was incumbent upon every Roman matron to visit the temple. And each worshipper must walk the entire distance from her home to the temple and must leave her house barefoot, barefoot she must walk from the temple to her home. Only illness excused a Roman woman from this religious duty. Few ever omitted it from indifference. During these eight days the temple was thronged.

During these eight days also fell the great yearly festival of Vesta, on the ninth of June, on which day

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also all millers kept holiday, with processions and picnics to which the mill-donkeys were led decorated with wreaths of flowers and strings of tiny, crisp-baked rolls.

On June fifteenth the temple was ceremonially cleaned and the sweepings and the ashes collected from the sacred fire for the year past were solemnly carried in a stately procession to a prescribed spot on the slope of the Capitol where a great pit was closed by a heavy maple-wood door. In this pit the ashes were reverently buried.

Besides these observances of their special cult the Vestals took part in nearly every important sacrifice, procession and festival of the public worship of Rome. They were busy women and among them Brinnaria was anything but idle. She never found time hang heavy on her hands.

So busied with her duties she passed three peaceful years, contented and happy. There was but one drawback to life in the Atrium from Brinnaria's point of view. That drawback was Meffia. Meffia was never ill but never well. Everything tired her. It tired her to walk upstairs, to stand for any length of time, to do anything. She was forever sitting down to rest or lying down to rest. Excitement exhausted her totally. She was a perpetual worry to the other Vestals.

Otherwise Brinnaria was very happy. Through Flexinna she had frequent news of Almo. Ancient Rome had no institution, public or private, in any way corresponding to our postoffice. But routes of trade and travel by land and sea were well defined and traffic along them fairly regular, on the most used routes almost continual. There were private organizations, vaguely resembling our modern express companies, which forwarded merchandise along the main-travelled routes and

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even into remote regions. Their messengers took charge of bales, boxes and packages of all sizes and also of letters. The service on the roads of Africa, from Bescera, Nepte and Putea along the frontier of the desert, through Lambese, Capsa and Thysdrus, to Carthage, by well-built vehicles with frequent relays of horses on the excellent highroads was fairly good. The ships from Sicily plied with almost the regularity of our ocean-liners. Roads and road-service in Sicily were of a high quality of excellence. The transit to Italy at Messina was a sort of ferry. Italy was served by a network of roads always busy. Almo's letters to Flexinna were fairly regular and Vocco heard frequently from his friends among Almo's brother officers and sometimes from his military superiors.

Almo was an immediate and brilliant success as a leader of scouting expeditions, cavalry dashes, and, within a year, of raids in considerable force. His men adored him at once; his fellow-officers found him excellent company, unassuming and companionable, his commanders came early to rely on him. He won an excellent reputation and was universally regarded as a young officer of great promise, likely to rise to high position and not unlikely to become famous.

This kind of news delighted Brinnaria and promoted her peace of mind. In great contentment she went about her duties, loving them more and more from month to month, preparing the blessed salt, assisting at sacrifices, participating in processions.

Also interest in music and enjoyment of music came to play more and more a part in her spiritual life. As a child she had hated music and had been in continual conflict with her musical governesses. Even after she entered the Atrium her aversion to learning anything

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about music had given Causidiena a great deal of trouble. Later Brinnaria was docile, but the reverse of enthusiastic. Only after Almo's departure for Africa did music begins to mean anything to her.

But one keyed instrument was known to the ancients. That was a form of organ, in effect and appearance not very dissimilar to a small portable modern organ, with one bank of keys. Its mechanism, however, was very different in respect to the construction of the pipe stops and bellows. In particular, the steady flow of air to the pipes was obtained from the pressure of water, and a receptacle partly filled with water was an essential part of every Roman organ. From this feature it was called the water-organ. The Emperor Nero had been a notable performer on the water-organ and had interested himself in some improvements in its mechanism.

As with the modern organ, so with the Roman water-organ, the sonorous, sustained and resonant notes lent themselves naturally to the expression of religious emotion.

Religious emotions, Brinnaria, at this period of her life, felt to an overwhelming extent. She expressed them in long colloquies with Numisia and Causidiena, in a tendency to be unnecessarily careful about her duties, to pet her daily routine, as it were; and in an awakening to the charms of music in general and of organ music in particular. She developed into a capable performer on the water-organ, bought for herself the finest to be found in all Rome, had it set up in the Atrium in place of the old one which had belonged to the order of Vestals, and sat before it for hours at a time.

Her solitary communings with her favorite instru-

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ment became her chief solace when she was low-spirited, which was seldom, and her favorite diversion when she was high-spirited, which was often. Moreover, her rendition of well-known airs and her improvisings came to be a great pleasure to all the inmates of the Atrium, most of all to Causidiena.

Besides her many duties and her indoor amusements, Brinnaria found time for much activity outside the Atrium. She had kept up her girlish friendship for the sieve-maker Truttidius, and saw him occasionally, sometimes ordering her litter halted before his shop and leaning out to ask after his health and that of his family. Truttidius had an ailing household, though he himself was always well and never seemed to get any older.

From her talks with Truttidius she came to take a personal interest in the welfare of the countless tenants in her many properties in the poorer quarters of the city. She visited some of them—a sort of approach to modern slumming by the philanthropic rich. Such actions on the part of a landowner and such an attitude of mind from any rich person toward the poor was very unusual in the ancient world. Her behavior in this regard won Brinnaria a sort of fame among the poor, as if she were a live goddess moving among them.

She had a healthy love of mere enjoyment too. Except when she happened to be on duty watching the sacred fire, she never missed a theatrical performance, a gladiatorial display or an exhibition of chariot-racing in any one of the vast race-courses flanked by tiers of stone-seats, which the Romans called circuses. At all shows, whether of scenic artists, fighting men or speeding horses, the Vestals had specified seats, as good as the best.

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Besides these formal pleasures, she took great delight in mixing in society merely for society's sake. Moderns are likely to imagine that the Vestals of ancient Rome were nuns or something like nuns. They were nothing of the sort. They were maiden ladies of wealth and position whose routine duties brought them into familiar association with all the men important in the Roman government, hierarchy, nobility and gentry and with their wives and daughters. They were women of such importance in their world that their acquaintance was sought by all who had any pretensions to being entitled to meet them and by shoals of social bounders who had none. Their influence was so powerful that they were unremittingly sought, waylaid, pursued and besieged by persons who hoped to enlist their interest in the appointment or promotion of this, that or the other connection or relative; by the same persons they were continually overwhelmed with presents of flowers, fruit, delicacies, dainties, ornaments, laces, garments, pieces of furniture, horses, slaves, and of anything and everything capable of being made a present of in the Roman world; likewise with social invitations—chiefly to dinners, banquets and feasts. Invitations to banquets and dinners Brinnaria seldom declined, unless her duties made acceptance impossible or the invitation came from people beneath her notice. As she had said to Aurelius, she had an excellent appetite. She had an epicurean tendency from her early years and was fond of oysters, sweetbreads, eels, thrushes, turbot and other articles of food esteemed as delicacies by the Romans. But she was a hearty eater and consumed generous portions of roast meats, particularly of pork, which even in late imperial times was the staple of Roman diet. She never lost her childish relish for boiled pork and cabbage, for

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bacon, for ham, hot or cold. She was by no means a glutton, ate deliberately and daintily, and while she ate, joined in the general conversation or even led it. She had a quick wit and a sharp tongue and her sallies were acclaimed. She was sought after as a guest not merely because she was a Vestal, but for herself, for her gaiety and her unexpected utterances.

On the whole she preferred informal dinners to formal banquets and liked better to dine with her friends than with the most luxurious entertainers in Roman society.

With Vocco and Flexinna she dined frequently, three times a month at least and generally oftener. Brinnaria loved children, especially babies, and there was always a baby in the Istorian household—Flexinna's babies were all healthy and grew famously. Of the six children, Brinnaria could not have told which she loved or which loved her most. Her arrivals were always heralded with shouts of glee, her romps with the children always put her in a good humor, her swim with Flexinna sharpened an appetite which needed no edge, while the cosiness and informality of Flexinna's dining-room, where each of the three had undivided possession of one entire sofa, made it certain that nothing marred her enjoyment.

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CHAPTER XIII

PERVERSITY

ABOUT three years after her farewell to Almo, on entering Vocco's house one afternoon, Brinnaria had a presentiment of something wrong. The children were as vociferous and as whimsical as usual, but there was a nameless difference in Flexinna's expression and bearing. As soon as they were alone in their bath, after she had had one good plunge in the pool, Brinnaria, treading water in the deepest part of the tank, shaking her head like a wet spaniel, demanded:

"What is the matter? There's something wrong. You might as well tell me."

But Flexinna put her off and laughed at her insistence.

To Brinnaria the laughter seemed forced and so did the talk at dinner. No sooner was the dinner over and the tray of figs, almonds and pomegranates and other fruit on the table, than she whispered to Flexinna:

"Tell the servants to stay out. I want to talk."

Flexinna signed to Vocco and they exchanged glances.

"Why did you keep up the farce so long?" Brinnaria sneered. "I saw through it from the first."

"We were afraid," Vocco apologized, "that what I have to tell you would spoil your appetite."

"It would take something pretty bad to spoil my appetite," Brinnaria reflected. "Is Almo dead?"

"Not so b-b-bad as that," spoke Flexinna.

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"Tell me, Quintus," Brinnaria breathed.

Vocco fidgeted.

"It's an amazing story," he began.

"All his story, all my story, all our story," Brinnaria cut in, "is amazing. Leave out the comments and tell the story."

"While Almo was away on the expedition against the nomads of the plateau," Vocco narrated, "Pennasius fell ill, was allowed to resign his governorship and Grittonius took his place. On Almo's return Grittonius complimented him most highly and promised him any reward he asked for. Almo amazed him by asking for a full and honorable discharge from the army. Grittonius expostulated with him but Almo held him to his promise. In spite of the governor's appeals to his pride and to his patriotism he insisted, and Grittonius gave him his full official discharge. At once Almo applied for permission to sell himself as a slave. This so astounded Grittonius that he made him repeat the application before witnesses and give his reasons. Almo explained that he had always been devoted to horse-racing and that he wanted formally and regularly to article himself to one of the racing companies as a charioteer; that he had always craved that life and had longed for it more and more as his career as a soldier went on. He said there was no use in his continuing a life he detested, nor missing the happiness he anticipated as a charioteer.

"Grittonius had him examined by a committee of the most reputed physicians of the province. They reported Almo entirely sane. Grittonius wanted to hold the matter over until he had special permission from the Emperor. Almo craftily maintained that Grittonius had been made governor with the fullest powers

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on all lines specifically to save the Emperor from being bothered about such trifles. Grittonius yielded. The necessary papers were drawn up, all the depositions were made out in duplicate. Every formality was fulfilled and Almo was publicly sold as a slave in the market place of Hippo."

"What company did he enter?" Brinnaria queried.

"Veppius did not state," Vocco replied; "he merely said that Almo sailed the next day for Spain."

"The fool!" Brinnaria cried. "The three fools; a fool of a Veppius to write so vaguely, a fool of a governor to be persuaded so easily and Almo the biggest fool of all!

"What a fool of a lover I have! Are all men like that? I'm as much in love with him as he with me and I can behave myself decently and keep outwardly calm and observe the conventions of life. Why can't he be decent? How can it comfort a man in love to throw away a splendid career, abandon a great income and vanish from the ken of all who love him? What madness is this with which the gods afflict him? Oh, I could tear my hair with rage!"

To trace Almo everything was done that could be done. Vocco himself set out at once for Hippo. He found that Almo had been sold to a Greek slave-dealer named Olynthides, brother of the well-known dealer at Rome. He found Olynthides a small man with a club-foot. He said he remembered the matter, that he had been employed to buy Almo and resell him for cash, especially to conceal the real purchaser.

When Vocco expressed astonishment Olynthides said;

"There is nothing to be surprised at, the thing happens every day. It is a regular feature of slave-trading. There are all sorts of reasons why a man wants a

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slave without any past. Such sales are customary and habitual."

When pressed further he retorted:

"Of course I did not ask the buyer's name; equally of course, I did not take any note of him, it was my business to forget him. I didn't notice him when he came into the courtyard, there are always knots of people coming in all day, looking over the slaves I offer for sale, and going out again. He came in like anybody else and looked over my stock. When he spoke to me he had a servant with him carrying a stout leather bag. He indicated Almo and asked his price. I named it.

" 'Cash sale,' says he; 'no papers except a bare sale certificate.'

" 'Done,' says I.

"He counted out the cash from his servant's bag and I gave him the customary certificate, with a description of Almo and the statement:

" 'Sold on this day and date for cash' and my signature and seal. That was all there was to it."

When Vocco was persistent, Olynthides averred that he had "heard" that the purchaser's name was Jegius and that he came from Cadiz. Vocco could not discover any one in Hippo who had ever heard of a slave-dealer named Jegius.

When Vocco returned to Rome with his report Brinnaria set in motion all the forces of her world which could be utilized under the circumstances. Aurelius was on the Rhine frontier, but Brinnaria had, by this time, a close acquaintance with all important court officers and was on terms of the utmost cordiality with the officials who governed Rome in the Emperor's absence. They sympathized with her and put at her

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disposal all the machinery of the government secret-service. They agreed with her that the matter must be kept quiet, there must be no proclamations, posters, no rewards offered by crier or placard, no publishing of descriptions. With emphatic injunctions of secrecy they sent warnings to every provincial governor, to every local magistrate, to the aldermen of every free city, to institute unobtrusive investigations and to keep unostentatious watch. Brinnaria insisted that these mandates should be sent all over the Empire, pointing out that no one could conjecture what port of the Mediterranean or of the Black Sea might be the destination of any nameless trading ship. But, with special care, full orders were distributed throughout Spain.

Towards Spain, likewise, Brinnaria directed the energies of those organizations of the ancient world which were analogous to our modern private detective bureaus, and upon Spain she focussed the energies of the managers of the racing companies.

These great corporations were among the most important money-making enterprises of the Roman world. They maintained luxurious headquarters in the most congested business districts of the capital. They had offices adjacent to each of the circuses, they possessed huge congeries of buildings utilized as stables for their crack racers and barracks for their charioteers, and provided with spacious courtyards for training their teams. Outside of Rome they had similar offices and training-stables in every city and in most towns of any size or wealth. Besides they owned countless stud-farms, estates and ranches in every province of the Empire and maintained an army of herdsmen, ostlers and drovers to convoy their horses by land and whole fleets of ships to transport them by sea.

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They were joint-stock companies, and while many smaller ones existed in various parts of the Empire and a few even at Rome, the small concerns were insignificant and generally ignored. When one spoke of the racing-companies one meant the six great companies whose central organizations were domiciled at Rome and whose ramifications penetrated every district of the Empire. These were known, after the racing-colors of their jockeys, as the Greens, the Blues, the Reds, the Whites, the Purples and the Golds. The Reds and the Whites were the oldest companies, the Purples and the Golds were companies established in the heyday of the Empire by coteries of millionaires, the Blues and the Greens were the largest, the wealthiest and the most popular, especially the Greens. In the Greens, somewhere, Brinnaria expected to find Almo, as he had been enthusiastic about the Greens from boyhood. He had been wearing their leek-green colors the day she had sat in his lap in her father's courtyard. He had haunted their training-stables during his brief sojourn at Rome before Aurelius sent him to Africa, he had inherited a big block of stock in the Greens. In the Greens, likewise, Brinnaria owned stock; and, having entered into inheritance from more than seventy different wealthy relatives who had died during the pestilence, she happened to own stock in every one of the six great companies. She had personal friends among the directors of each of the six. Therefore it was especially easy for her to enlist their help in her efforts to find Almo. It would have been easy, anyhow, since to be able to oblige a Vestal was a refreshing novelty for almost any one at Rome and to find a Vestal seeking one's influence and one's help, equally novel and refreshing; generally the shoe was on the other foot—most persons

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in public life in Rome were used to attempting to enlist the help and the interests of the Vestals for their purposes and were generally utterly at a loss for any means of requital, if the interest of a Vestal was enlisted and her help obtained.

Consequently all that the racing-companies could do to find Almo was done as well as all that could be done by the private detective agencies and by government officials.

All that was done was utterly in vain. No trace of Almo could be discovered after he had sailed from Hippo with Jegius. No slave-dealer named Jegius could be found nor any one who knew such a slave-dealer. No clue, no ghost of a clue came to light. The Greens, like the other companies, could find among their charioteers, their jockeys, their free employees, their slaves, no individual in the least answering to descriptions of Almo. All governmental efforts, all professional efforts, all private efforts, all Vocco's efforts, all Brinnaria's efforts, were completely baffled.

Almo had completely vanished.

When Aurelius, passing through Rome on his way from the Rhine frontier to Syria, was in his capital for a brief period, Brinnaria had an audience with him.

"Daughter!" he said, "it is all my fault. I should have given Grittonius explicit injunctions about the boy. But the assaults of the Marcomanni were particularly furious just at that time; I was feverishly hurrying from point to point along the frontier; I accepted the resignation of Pennasius by letter. I appointed Grittonius by letter; I assumed that Grittonius would have sense; I assumed that Pennasius would impart to him his secret instructions. I erred by inadvertence; I should have set a special watch on the boy. But I

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never thought of it. He was doing so well and he seemed so interested in his work. He was wonderfully fitted for frontier duty along the desert. I was watching him with keen interest; each report of him gave me greater pleasure. I do not hesitate to tell you that I had him in my mind's eye to command this very expedition which I must now command myself, as there is no other man in the Empire fit to take charge of it.

"Is it not a shame that a man whom the Empire needs, who had before him so splendid an opportunity, who was fitting himself for so brilliant a career, should throw it all away from mere perversity? Yet I am not wrathful against him; I see many reasons for sympathizing with him.

"Rigid and unflinching celibacy affects different individuals very differently. Some it does not affect at all, apparently. It does not seem to affect you. You are as plump and rosy, as healthy and alert, as happy and normal a young woman, to all appearance, as could be found among matrons of your age in all the Empire. Celibacy seems to agree with you.

"Manifestly it did not agree with Almo. It got on his nerves somehow. That is the most probable explanation of his eccentric vagary. Don't be discouraged. He'll turn up somewhere, after a while, safe and sound and none the worse for his experiences."

Brinnaria, in fact, was not discouraged. She resolutely and unweariedly prosecuted her efforts to find Almo. Nor was she despondent. She scouted the suggestion that he might be dead. She kept up her spirits, did not mope or brood and never lost her hearty appetite. She was the life of the dinners she attended and as talkative and witty as ever.

But the strain affected her greatly. She was out-

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wardly controlled, statuesque and dignified, but the inward turmoil of emotion that surged through her manifested itself in an unremitting activity. She slept well and soundly, but rose early and kept on the go. Besides her duties, her music and her participation in social gatherings, she must needs find other outlets for her energy, other means to pass her time and distract her thoughts.

In the course of her dealings with the racing companies she became interested in them not merely as means towards locating Almo, but for themselves. She became particularly interested in their stables, their jockeys and their horses. There was no bar of religious tradition or of social custom which hindered a Vestal from freely mingling with men visibly in the open daylight in public. Visiting the stables of the racing companies had long been a fad with Rome's social leaders, men and women alike. Brinnaria availed herself of her freedom in this regard and followed her inclination. She haunted the training-stables of all six corporations, but mostly of the Greens, always in company with Manlia, or Flexinna, or Nemestronia or some other of her women friends; she visited the barracks almost daily, chatted with the charioteers, grooms and ostlers, watched the exercising of the teams, inspected the stalls, conned the racers.

She made herself an excellent judge of a jockey and a better judge of a horse.

She interested herself in the methods by which the companies obtained and selected their animals. She became an adept on the entire subject of horse-raising. It engrossed her thoughts.

Then she herself took over the management of several of her estates in the environs of Rome; of all, in

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fact, which were near enough for her to visit personally. She redistributed the force of slaves that managed them, sold some, bought others and fitted up the properties as stud-farms. Herself she selected the brood-mares and stallions with which to stock these estates. She herself laid down the principles guiding their management and she herself dictated the methods of breeding them. She herself superintended the carrying out of her orders, visiting each estate frequently and inspecting everything carefully and intelligently.

Her first offering of two-year-olds sold at good prices. She was encouraged, felt herself completely an adept, and would take no one's word about anything relating to horses, relying solely on her own judgment.

All this would have subjected her to much apprehension had Faltonius Bambilio survived. But he had died just about the time of Almo's disappearance. His son, also named Faltonius Bambilio, had taken up a political rather than a priestly life and was not to be thought of as his successor. In his place Aurelius, on his way to Syria, had nominated Lutorius Rusco, a man who impressed every one at first sight, and more and more the better any one knew him, as the paragon of a Pontifex. He was not lacking in ecclesiastical unction, but did not wallow in it as had Bambilio. He was pious, but did not think it necessary to advertise it day and night unremittingly. He was not lax in religious matters, but he was no stickler for minute trifles. He inspired confidence by every characteristic of his appearance and behavior. He was a man somewhat over medium height, well built, neither heavy nor large, with an unusually dignified bearing and carriage, not a hint of self-assertion and with a genially comprehending smile. It was impossible not to confide in him

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and unthinkable that confiding in him should ever be regretted. Brinnaria confided in him and never regretted it.

Of Almo's disappearance she talked to him freely; freely also she talked of her feelings for Almo. He was as sympathetic and comprehending as the Emperor and Empress and he encouraged her to hope that Almo was yet alive, which she sometimes doubted.

Of her stock farms he said to her:

"I should certainly not have advised any woman to enter upon such an enterprise, least of all a Vestal. I know of no other member of our hierarchy who has any similar interests, except Calvaster, whose haunting of the gladiatorial schools and association with trainers of gladiators has given some scandal. Some people would call your horse-breeding unseemly for a Vestal. But I see no harm in it. I have talked with Causidiena and it is clear that you do not neglect or skimp your duties, that you give them full time and close attention. Your leisure is your own to do with as you please. And your immediate success appears an evidence that, to say the least, your undertakings give no offence to the gods."

During the latter months of Bambilio's oversight Brinnaria had felt restive and as if some inward force was forever driving her to feverish activities; under the care of Lutorius she became placid and thought less of her stock-raising, journeys to and fro to her estates, talks with grooms and such like activities and devoted herself with more cool ardor to her duties.

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CHAPTER XIV

AMAZEMENT

AURELIUS returned from Syria with his victorious army in the nine hundred and twenty-ninth year of Rome, 176 of our era, ten years after the great pestilence. He had merely crushed a local rebellion, but a vast coalition of nomadic Arab tribes of the desert had been allied with the rebels, and to the Romans it seemed that their Emperor had won a great victory in a mighty campaign. Aurelius humored their mood, and with good judgment, for they needed all the encouragement possible. He arranged to have his return celebrated by shows of all kinds, theatrical performances, fights of gladiators, beast fights, horse-races uncountable and above all, by that thrilling procession of a victor and his armed soldiers through the city along the Sacred Street, up to the great temple on the Capitol, which was the highest honor an army and a commander could receive at the hands of the Roman government, which signalized a notable victory over notable odds, which was called a triumph. Of triumphs Rome had seen fewer than three hundred in more than nine hundred years. Not one of the three hundred had been as magnificent as the triumph of Aurelius.

Its auxiliary spectacles were similarly magnificent. In particular the gladiatorial shows surpassed anything within the memory of the oldest living spectator.

Causidiena, whose eyes troubled her greatly, found

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that watching the triumphal procession caused her so much pain that she absented herself from the remaining shows. To all of these, races, beast-fights and combats of gladiators, she insisted that the other five Vestals should go together. The arrangement was unusual, but no one could object, for no one would hint or even think that the sacred fire would be in any danger of going out with such a Chief Vestal as Causidiena caring for it or that she needed any other Vestal to assist her. Likewise her five colleagues were genuinely pleased that not one of them would miss any part of the shows.

As the number was odd, Causidiena decreed that they should be conveyed to the spectacles each in her own state coach, attended by her maid of honor. The maids, of course, did not sit with the Vestals, but had seats far back with the populace.

In their luxurious private box in the Colosseum the five Vestals sat in the ample front row arm-chairs. They were seated not according to seniority, but Numisia in the middle, Meffia and Brinnaria, as the youngest, on either side of her, Gargilia next Meffia, and Manlia next Brinnaria.

In the Imperial loge near them Aurelius, now for more than a year a widower, presided over the games, clad in his gorgeous silk robes and attended by his fifteen-year-old son Antoninus, afterward known by his nickname of "Commodus."

The four tiers of the Colosseum were packed with spectators, pontiffs, senators, nobles, ambassadors, magistrates and other notables in the front seats along the coping of the arena wall, lesser notables in the first tier, well-to-do persons in the second tier, traders and

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manufacturers and such like in the third tier and the commonalty in the fourth.

Besides the ninety thousand seated spectators many thousand more stood in the galleries, in the openings of the stairways, in any place where a foothold could be found and from which a view could be obtained. The outlook from the Vestals' box was across the level sand to the gigantic curve of seats, all hidden under their occupants, so that the interior of the Amphitheatre was a vast expanse of flower-crowned heads, eager faces and waving fans.

During that second day of gladiatorial fighting Manlia had several times said to Brinnaria:

"Is there anything wrong? Are you ill? You do not seem yourself!"

Each time Brinnaria had positively denied that anything was wrong and had asserted that she was entirely herself.

About the middle of the afternoon, the arena was filled with pairs of gladiators, all the couples fighting simultaneously. Each pair had with it a trainer, called a lanista, who watched, guided or checked the fighting. The contending pairs were of a kind much liked by the Romans, because of the excitement they afforded, each pair consisting of a light-built, light-armed, nimble expert pitted against a heavily built, heavily armed ruffian, the two supposed to be equally matched, the strength and weapons of the one fully balanced by the skill and agility of the other.

Viewing fights of this kind Manlia felt rather than heard or saw a change in Brinnaria next her, felt her stiffen and grow silent, rigid and tense. Manlia glanced at her, followed her gaze and became interested in the fight Brinnaria was watching. Before them, not im-

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mediately below them, but some distance out in the arena, fought a conspicuous pair of gladiators. One was a great hulking full-armored brute of a Goth, helmeted and corseleted, kilted in bronze-plated leather straps, booted, as it were, with ample shin-guards of thick hide, bronze-plated like the straps of his flapping kilt. He carried a big oval shield and threatened with a long straight sword his adversary, a Roman in every outline, a slender young man, barefoot, bare-legged, kilted with the scantiest form of gladiator's body-piece and apron, clad in a green tunic and carrying only the small round shield and short sabre of a Thracian. He wore a helmet like a skull cap with a broad nose-guard that amounted to a mask, above which were small openings for his eyes.

Conning this pair Manlia's attention was rivetted by the slighter man. He was very light on his feet, jaunty of bearing and, as it were, ablaze with self-confidence. Manlia, who was an expert judge of sword-fighting, perceived at once that he was a master of his art. His method for the moment was to hold back, lead his opponent on and bide his time. His attitudes and movements bespoke the most perfect knowledge of sword play in all its finest details. But what most held Manlia's attention was his beauty of form and a strange something about him, a long-armed, long-legged appearance. She turned to Brinnaria.

"I should have sworn," she said, "that there was not in all the world another man like Segontius Almo. But that Thracian is a duplicate of him, as like him as if he were his twin brother."

"More like him than a twin brother," Brinnaria replied, her voice muffled and choked. "I've been watch-

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ing him ever since he came in. I recognized him in the procession this morning. That is Almo."

"Almo!" breathed Manlia, in a horrified whisper.

"Yes, Almo!" hissed Brinnaria.

"What shall we do?" quavered Manlia.

"Do?" snorted Brinnaria, "do nothing."

"But we can pray," Manlia panted. "We can pray. Surely you are praying, Brinnaria?"

"I am praying," came the answer, in a viperish whisper. "I'm praying he may be killed."

"Killed!" Manlia gasped.

"Yes, killed," repeated Brinnaria, viciously. "Killing is what he deserves, mere killing is too good for him. If he wanted to commit suicide why couldn't he do it decently at once and privately without all this elaborate machinery of selling himself as a slave, and lying about his intentions and disgracing himself by becoming a prize-fighter and exposing himself to getting killed in public? Why couldn't he get killed at Treves or Lyons or Aquileia? Why must he humiliate me by this exhibition of himself before me and all Rome? The quicker he is killed the better. I'm praying he'll be killed at once."

"Oh, Brinnaria!" groaned the horrified Manlia.

The Thracian was not killed in that first fight; he was never in any danger of being killed. He played with his man as a cat plays with a mouse; held him off without an effort, caught the attention of all the nearby spectators; won their interest by the perfection of his sword-play; and aroused their enthusiasm by that nameless quality which marks off, from even the best drilled talent, the man who is a born genius in his line. He pinked his victim between corselet and helmet, so lightly that only those spectators watching most

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closely saw the lunge, so effectually that the man died almost as he fell.

"You must have prayed for him to win; I did," spoke Manlia.

"I didn't," Brinnaria snapped. "I prayed for him to be killed. I wish he had been. I'm not the only one who has recognized him. Aurelius has and he has told Antoninus; I watched him."

"How could you?" Manlia exclaimed. "How could you watch anything but Almo?"

"I could and I did," Brinnaria asseverated. "I'm looking all ways at once, just now. The news is all over the Imperial loge already. They are looking at me as well as at him. I hope he'll be killed this next bout."

The lanista, in fact, at once matched Almo with another full-armed giant. Again Almo gave an exhibition of perfect swordsmanship. The Romans were as quick to appreciate form in fighting as we moderns are to applaud our best ball players; they recognized pre-eminence in the swordman's art, as we acclaim the skill of a crack baseball pitcher or cricket bowler. Almo caught the eye of spectator after spectator, till most of the audience on that side of the arena were watching the fight in which he took part to the exclusion of everything else that was going on. He displayed that perfect balance of all the mental and physical faculties, that instantaneous co-ordination of eye, brain and muscle, which only an occasional phenomenon can attain to. He made no mistakes, bore himself like a dancer on a tight-rope, circled about his adversary, warded off all his thrusts, lunges and rushes, turned aside his long sword with his small round shield without a trace of effort, and at his leisure found a

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joint in his body armor and pierced his heart with an ostentatiously difficult lunge delivered with the acme of apparent ease.

"There," sighed Manlia, "I prayed hard."

"So did I," Brinnaria murmured, "but I prayed the other way. He ought to have been killed already. Numisia has recognized him and he has been recognized by three or four nobles along the coping. The rumor is spreading from each of them and running through the audience."

Manlia, in fact, looking about, was aware of an unusual stir among the spectators, of notes being handed along and read, of whisperings, callings, signs, pointings; of messengers worming their way from row to row and from tier to tier.

Almo won his third bout. While it was in progress Manlia had seen one of the Emperor's orderlies enter the arena from one of the small doors in the wall and confer with the chief lanista, who directed the fighting.

By the time Almo began a fourth bout half the audience was looking at him or at Brinnaria. There were thousands present who had survived the pestilence, who had been present fifteen years before when she had let herself down into the arena and had rescued the retiarius. They remembered her spectacular interference and were curious as to how she would now comport herself. Brinnaria, erect and calm, fanned herself placidly.

Almo won his fourth bout.

By this time the arrangements of the lanistas had been so far modified that, instead of a great throng of fighters, there were, in the whole immense arena, not more than twenty pairs.

With scarcely a breathing space Almo was pitted

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against a fifth adversary. By the time he had disposed of him the entire audience, fully a hundred thousand souls, were as well aware of what was going on as was Brinnaria herself. She was pale, but entirely collected. To Manlia she whispered venomously:

"Castor be thanked, he is certain to be killed, Aurelius has attended to that."

In fact the Roman sense of fair play was offended when the lanista gave Almo a mere moment of rest and then set against him a sixth antagonist. Murmurs ran from tier to tier, there were hoots and cat-calls. Aurelius put up his hand and the people became still.

It was not often that the entire throng in the Colosseum focussed its attention on any one fighter. That happened now. The dozen or more other pairs of fighters were ignored, all eyes were on Almo and his opponent—all eyes that did not stray towards Brinnaria.

Almo was not showing any signs of weariness, but he was plainly husbanding his strength. The sixth bout was tame—seldom had the Amphitheatre displayed so mild a set to. The heavy-armed man had seen Almo dispose of five like himself, he was timid; Almo was not timid, but he was cautious. The result was a tedious exhibition of fencing for position, each sword monotonously caught on the other shield. At the end Almo slashed his opponent's wrist, feinted, pretended to be unable to avoid a clumsy thrust, slipped inside the big man's guard and drove his sabre deep under his arm-pit.

The Colosseum rang with cheers.

Without so much as a sponging down or a mouthful of wine Almo was faced by a seventh fresh swordsman in complete armor. This time there were no caterwaulings or groans. Even the upper gallery had rec-

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ognized Almo or been told who he was, even the populace had remembered or had been informed of the relation between Almo and Brinnaria. Everybody had recalled or been reminded of her rescue of the retiarius. The audience collectively comprehended that Aurelius meant Almo to be defeated and put at an adversary's mercy before Brinnaria, that he was testing her.

The habitual hubbub, hum, and buzz of undertones was checked to a very unusual degree, the Amphitheatre became almost still.

But when Almo fairly duplicated his first bout and neatly, almost without effort, cut his victim's throat, the audience cheered him vociferously.

Louder, if possible did they acclaim his calm and adequate strategy against his eighth antagonist.

A ninth and a tenth were promptly put beyond power to hurt him by wounds ingeniously disabling, but far from deadly.

The eleventh bout was more tedious than the sixth. Almo divined some greater strength or skill in this adversary and played him warily. When the audience was bored to the point of being almost ready to call for something diverting Almo slaughtered his man with a terrible wound between his corselet and kilt.

The twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth antagonists Almo plainly despised. He stood almost still, hardly altering the position of his feet except to turn as the huge barbarians circled ponderously about him. Each he brought down with his first lunge.

As the fifteenth bout began the audience was manifestly impatient and restive. But they were not bored. That one Thracian, almost without rest, should successively dispose of fourteen antagonists, in the fullest armor, was a notable feat. The perfect form of Almo's

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fighting was even more notable. At each victory the audience cheered him till they were hoarse. They seemed to cheer quite spontaneously and to need the relief for their feelings. But also they seemed to mean to give him as long a rest as was in their power. They were all for him.

But no man could go on fighting continually without fatigue. In his fifteenth bout Almo moved heavily. The other man was unusually quick for a big man. He handled his big sword deftly. After much sparring he was too quick for Almo, and the point of his slender blade scratched Almo's splay vizor, nicked his chin, and tore a long shallow slash in the skin of his right breast.

Blood welling through it stained the green of Almo's tunic; blood dropping from his chin spotted the bright green.

The populace groaned.

Manlia prayed.

Brinnaria, under scrutiny of two hundred thousand eyes, sat erect, fanned herself steadily, and gazed straight before her. To all appearance she was as indifferent to Almo as if he did not exist.

After that Almo moved like a sleep-walker or a man in a dream, dully and dazedly.

The big man feinted and lunged cleverly. The point of his weapon ripped Almo's thigh on the outside above the knee. No man could stand up after such a wound. He went down, his shield under him.

From all around the arena, from every tier, automatically, thousands of arms shot out, thumb down. Instantly every arm whipped back and was hidden under its owner's robe. All realized that expression of sym-

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pathy was not their business. A hush fell. Everybody looked at the Emperor and at Brinnaria.

Brinnaria sat erect in her arm-chair, fanning herself evenly, staring straight across the arena. The same instinct, the same curiosity which actuated the rest of the audience, restrained the Vestals from giving the sign of mercy. All felt that the matter concerned only Aurelius and Brinnaria, that for any one else to interfere would be flouting the Emperor.

Brinnaria, white as a corpse, dizzy and numb, kept up the unvarying motion of her fan. Otherwise she was perfectly still.

The victor rolled his eyes along the rows of spectators. He got no inkling of their feelings.

He gazed at the Vestals. The audience saw him gaze that way. Brinnaria ignored him, Almo and all the world.

The victor looked toward the Emperor.

Aurelius held out his right hand, thumb up.

The lanista removed Almo's helmet. If any one had doubted his identity the doubt was dispelled among all near enough to make out his face.

The victor put one foot on Almo's chest. Almo stretched his neck.

Brinnaria sat there, tense, pale, but as collected as if she had no interest in what was going on.

The savage standing over Almo glanced a second time towards the Emperor.

Aurelius was holding his arm at full stretch over the coping, thumb down.

Brinnaria knew that she had won, that Aurelius had put her to the test before all Rome, that she had stood the test, that all Rome was witness. Her fingers

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clutched the handle of her fan. She could hardly feel it in her grasp.

The big man took his foot from Almo's chest.

The audience broke into howls of applause, gust after gust of cheers, roaring like a storm wind in a forest.

Brinnaria saw the arena, saw the spectators, through a film of mist, through a gray veil, through a fog of blackness. She realized that, for the first time in her life, she was on the verge of fainting. Mechanically she looked about her. Her glance fell on Meffia crumpled in her arm-chair.

That steadied her. If Meffia had fainted, she would not, she would not.

She did not faint. She fanned herself steadily as she watched the lanistas help Almo to hobble from the arena. When he was gone her attention returned to Meffia. Gargilia and Numisia were trying to rouse her. She remained crumpled, she collapsed, she slid off her chair to the floor of the box. She lay in a horrid heap unmistakable in its limpness. The excitement had been too much for Meffia. She was stone dead.

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BOOK III

THE REBELLION OF DESPERATION

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CHAPTER XV

REHABILITATION

THE death of a Vestal, except from old age, was always regarded by the Roman populace as a sign of the gods' disfavor. The death of a young Vestal, sudden, unexpected and unexplained, could not but cause great uneasiness throughout all classes of the population.

Moreover, gladiatorial exhibitions were part of the Roman public worship, which largely proceeded on the naïve assumption that the gods liked just about what men liked and that the best way to please the gods and win their favor was to delight them with such spectacles as men enjoyed, acrobatic exhibitions, dramas, beast-fights, fights of beasts with men or of men with men, chariot-races and similar exciting displays, and so put the gods in a good humor. This underlying theory of diverting spectacles as a species of prayer and as the most effective kind of prayer was not so much definitely expressed by the Romans, as tacitly and unconsciously assumed. It was, nevertheless, entirely real and all Romans felt every public show as an act of public worship, as a hallowed function.

Most Roman rites were held to be entirely vitiated if a death took place among the worshippers during the course of the ceremony. To all solemnities at which only a few persons were present this applied without

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qualification and positively. Naturally a death among the crowd about a temple was held of much less import. Still less could any one regard a death amid the vast throng in the Colosseum or the Circus Maximus. So that Meffia's sudden end was not necessarily held a certain indication of the wrath of the gods. But, as the death of one of the most important functionaries present at the spectacle, it caused much concern. The dismay of the people the pontiffs tried to alleviate by all the means in their power, by consultation of the augurs, soothsayers and professional prophets, and by official consultation of the Sibylline Books. The general anxiety was somewhat allayed by their placards and proclamations, announcing that Meffia's death was wholly due to her personal weakness and was not to be regarded as a portent, in particular that it in no way indicated the wrath of the gods or their rejection of the petition for public safety embodied in the spectacles celebrating the triumph of Aurelius.

The Temple and the Atrium of Vesta made up an institution in which death was entirely disregarded. As no seriously ill Vestal was ever allowed to remain within the limits of the Atrium, but, as soon as alarming symptoms appeared, was removed from the Atrium and put in charge of relations or friends, so also the body of a dead Vestal was always turned over to the care of her family or connections. Though the Vestals, alone among Romans, possessed the privilege of being buried inside the walls of Rome, though their funerals were magnificent public processions, participated in by all the functionaries of the state and lavishly provided at the public expense, yet the death itself was held to be a concern of the family of the dead Vestal, not of her surviving colleagues. The Vestals might mourn but

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the Atrium was never in mourning. Its routine went on as if nothing had happened; no sign of grief was displayed or even permitted; visitors were received as usual.

Among the first visitors to the Atrium on the morning after Almo's fight and Meffia's death was, naturally, Flexinna.

At the first word Brinnaria cut her short.

"I don't want to hear his name," she declared. "I'm done with him forever. I don't love him any longer; I don't care for him, even; I hate him. It does not concern me whether he recovers or not. I'd rather he wouldn't recover. The best thing for both of us would be for him to die anyhow. I wish he were dead; I wish one of those heavy men had killed him."

"B-B-Brinnaria!" Flexinna remonstrated, "you t-t-talk like a raving maniac! You look like a F-F-Fury!"

"I'm furious enough!" Brinnaria snarled, "and I've plenty of good cause for being angry. Was ever woman on earth put in a position so invidious, so embarrassing? Everybody knew of my rescue of the retiarius, thousands had seen me rescue him. Everybody knew of my involvement with Almo before I was taken for a Vestal, of our love for each other, of my expressed intention to marry him at the end of my service. Everybody recognized Almo.

"And there I was with the one man on earth in the jaws of death before my eyes and I with the power to save him if I chose and a hundred thousand people watching me to see what I would do. And because I had once before rescued a man in that same situation everybody expected me to do something unusual and spectacular to save Almo.

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"If it had been any other man it would have been the most natural thing in the world for me to give the signal for mercy and nobody would have thought anything of it. But, because the man before me was the man I had expressed my intention of marrying at the end of my service, therefore, if I had tried to save him, that would be taken as a confession of my being actuated by the sort of interest which no Vestal has a right to feel for any man.

"A delightful situation to be placed in!

"And he must needs go out of his way to put me in that position! When all he had to do was to live the normal life of a Roman gentleman and all things would in time come right for both of us, he must needs strain the powers of human ingenuity, compel the forces of time and space, of wind and wave to conspire to produce that situation and make me suffer those unnecessary agonies!

"Furious!

"Of course I'm furious.

"Never name him to me!"

When Lutorius Rusco, the new Pontifex of Vesta, called on her she was less explosive, but still fuming. She received him in the large room at the east end of the peristyle of the Atrium, a sort of parlor which had on either side of it three very small rooms, the six used as private offices by the six Vestals. There each had her writing desk, and the cabinets in which she kept her important papers, letters and such possessions.

After they had exchanged greetings Lutorius motioned towards Brinnaria's little sanctum. Brinnaria bridled.

"I've nothing to say that we cannot say out here,"

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she advertised, "and I do not want to hear anything that cannot be said out here."

Lutorius was tactful and had his way. When they were alone, he said:

"You were magnificent! You behaved splendidly. You could not have done better. We are all proud of you, from the Emperor down to the lowest slumgullion, every single Roman of us. You are certainly the most popular woman alive and your popularity is now of a sort to last as long as you live, complete and unqualified. You were popular before, but with considerable reservations. The hierarchy liked you, but were not sure that they ought to approve a Vestal who had perpetrated such exploits as yours, particularly your trouncing poor old Faltonius. The nobility admired you, but shook their heads over your stock-farming. The populace were enthusiastic about you, but, like the upper classes, were uneasy because of your expressed intention to marry at the end of your service and to marry a specified man, who had been your boyish lover. All classes acclaimed you as a woman, but nearly everybody was dubious about you as a Vestal.

"Now nobody has any hesitation about feeling that you are all a Vestal should be, a priestess whose prayers are certain to be heard and answered."

Brinnaria made a wry face.

"My prayers were not heard yesterday," she sighed. "Almo was not killed. I was praying hard to have him dead and have it all over with and done with forever."

Lutorius turned on her a slow, benignant, indulgent smile.

"Daughter," he said, "you must remember that you are not the only Vestal. Four Vestals were praying

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that Almo be saved, each praying not only with her lips but with every fibre of her being. And your heart and soul were praying silently with them and against the fierce prayers of your lips."

"It is not so," she denied. "Every fibre of me was praying as my lips prayed. My prayers were genuine."

"I am sure you thought so," Lutorius agreed. "It was natural for you to feel that way. You were very angry. But your anger will wear off."

"My anger may," Brinnaria admitted, "but never my resentment and my disgust."

"Only time can prove whether your forecast is correct," the Pontiff soothed her, "but are you justified even in being resentful? Ought you not rather to be thankful that chance or fate or the direct intervention of the gods working through Almo gave you the precious opportunity to free yourself from the shadow of an imputation that lay upon you from your entrance into the order? All Rome vaguely suspected you of too warm an interest in Almo. Much of Rome had seen and all Rome had heard of your theatrical rescue of a gladiator totally unknown to you. All Rome knew your impulsive nature. All Rome has now seen you perfectly controlled and outwardly calm with Almo on the verge of death before your eyes. Everybody has watched you ignore him and show less interest in his fate than you once manifested towards a casual savage. Your outward observance of the conventions under such trying circumstances has abolished any qualms the people felt because of your many past unconventionalities. This puts you in a very strong position toward any possible accusation or trial. You know how earnestly you have talked to me of your dread of such contingencies. Ought you not, after thinking it over, to

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forget your anger against Almo and to feel positively grateful for the opportunity so to exalt yourself?"

"Perhaps I ought," Brinnaria mused. "The value to me of the results I had not thought of, but admit it now that you expound it. But I am not grateful. I suffered too much. I am still smarting with indignation.

"And, apart from any remains of anger, I ache with the humiliation of it all. Think of the infamy, of the degradation Almo has brought on himself!"

Lutorius pursed his lips.

"There is a certain social stigma upon any man who has joined a prize-fighting gang," he conceded, "but the obloquy resulting from having been a gladiator has greatly attenuated amid the loose manners of our day. Nothing that becomes fashionable remains disgraceful. The social disgrace of it has greatly lessened as the thing has become more usual, and freemen who have been gladiators are rather acclaimed and sought after than condemned and shunned. They win a sort of vogue, if successful fighters.

"The treatment of such persons has greatly changed in recent years. Even since I began to remember there has been an all but universal alteration in the general attitude towards such cases—they have become too numerous for the old feelings to survive. Not only Roman citizens have entered gladiatorial schools, risen high in the profession, fought countless fights, served out their time as prize-fighters, and returned to their families, but noblemen have done so, even senators. Vescularius is as much a senator as if he had not won seventy-eight bouts in three years."

"I know it," Brinnaria admitted, "and I have thought over all that. But I am old-fashioned in my feelings,

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even if I have often been the reverse in my behavior. I am revolted at the thought of Almo as a professional cut-throat—I was insulted at the sight of him in the arena. I feel that by his abasement of himself he has obliterated my love for him. It is as if he had never existed. I shall not marry him, even if we both outlive my obligatory term of service. I shall never marry anybody. I shall die a Vestal."

"You feel that way now, of course," Lutorius agreed, "but you will get over it, though you do not think so now."

"I do not believe I shall ever get over it," Brinnaria declared. "So many things rankle in my thoughts, the small things even more than what is more important. I grind my teeth over the mere legal consequences of his having been a gladiator. He will forfeit half the properties he inherited and he can never hold any office, civil or military."

"All that," said Lutorius, "the Emperor will attend to in full. And your thinking of such trifles shows that you even yet care more for Almo than you admit to yourself.

"You must let me tell you about him. He is in the care of the best physicians in Rome. They assure me that he will recover, that his face will show but the merest trace of a scar, no disfigurement whatever, and that he will walk without the slightest limp. He is comfortable and convalescing nicely. I am going to bring you news of him daily, whether you think you want it or not, and you are going to listen to me because I tell you to."

Brinnaria, for once in her life, was submissive and silent.

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Not many days later the Pontiff greeted her with a contented smile.

"Almo," he said, "is now practically recovered. He is well enough to have enjoyed brief visits from several of his former cronies. He is in his house on the Carinæ, and it is besieged by all the fashionables of Rome, not only his boyhood friends and acquaintances, but people who never spoke to him. Everybody is rushing to call on him.

"He is a free man again. At an intimation of the Emperor's wishes Elufrius became as supple as possible and all willingness to oblige. He asked a huge price for Almo's release, and no wonder, for after the advertisement you gave him, Almo could have commanded fabulous fees for all future fights and the profits accruing to Elufrius must have been enormous. So Elufrius had to be paid a large sum, but nothing compared to even one year's accumulation of revenue from Almo's estates administered by his agents. So Almo will never feel that. The papers have all been drawn, signed and sealed. The cash has been paid. Almo is no longer a member of a gladiatorial band.

"And, at a word from the Emperor, the Senate framed and passed a decree relieving Almo of all the legal disabilities inhering in his past. He has been restored to his former rank in the nobility, has been confirmed in the possession of all inheritances which he might otherwise have forfeited, has been declared free from all stain and entirely fit to hold any office in the service of the Republic. The decree has been engrossed, sealed and signed by the Emperor. Almo is a nobleman as before. Are you pleased?"

"I am," Brinnaria confessed.

Lutorius nodded.

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"Now, do not take umbrage," he said, "at what I am about to ask. If you must say no, say no without being offended. May I tell the Emperor what you have said to me?"

"Certainly," Brinnaria authorized him. "Aurelius is so good a friend to me that sometimes I think he is the best friend I have on earth."

After an interval of some days the Pontiff hinted that the Emperor desired to see her. Brinnaria's disposition to stand upon ceremony and to insist on her full rights as a Vestal had waned as she grew to maturity. In her dealing with Aurelius she had long laid it aside altogether and likewise with Lutorius, both were so unassuming, so manifestly actuated by the sincerest regard for her. Now she obediently sent in her application for an audience with the Emperor.

It was accorded her about twenty days after Almo's fight. Aurelius came straight to the point.

"Daughter," he said, "I want you to tell me the entire truth. You can confide in me without reservation and you should do so without hesitation, since I ask it.

"What I wish you to tell me is this: Has your lover's behavior effaced your regard for him, as you asserted to Lutorius, or were you self-deceived? Is everything at an end between you and will you ignore his existence in future and remain a Vestal for life or have your feelings overcome your displeasure and are you again thinking of him and of your future as you did in the past?"

"Castor be good to me," Brinnaria confessed. "I did think his folly had alienated me from him forever, but the more I brood over it all the more I realize that no matter what he has done or does or will do I love

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him just as genuinely as if he deserved it, and as far as I can judge I shall love him to the last breath I draw. I am ashamed of my weakness, but I foresee that, when my service is over, I shall be just as eager to marry him as if he had been all he ought to have been."

"You please me," said Aurelius, "particularly in the way you put it.

"I am not in the habit of giving a second chance to any man. But Almo's case is so peculiar and the circumstances so unusual and my interest in him is so compelling that I am going to make an exception in respect to him. I shall give him another opportunity as an officer. I have reflected where to send him and I have concluded to relegate him to Britain. There, in the north, our frontier, pushed far beyond the former line, is ceaselessly attacked by the Caledonian savages. My predecessor's great earthwork needs larger garrisons. There Almo will find occupation and may rehabilitate himself. There he will be under the watch of Opstorius, who is a stern and scrupulous governor. He sets out this very day.

"Now is the time for me to speak to you of Calvaster. Calvaster, unfortunately, is as indispensable as ever, even more so. My impulse was to banish him, but I had to forego the idea. I contented myself with summoning him to my presence and telling him in so many words that the slightest suspicion of any further machinations by him against you or Almo would draw down on him the unescapable consequences of my severest displeasure. By that admonition, and by his chagrin at the unexpected and unwelcome outcome of his plot, I think him sufficiently punished. Also I think

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him thoroughly cowed. He will make no further attempt to trouble you.

"It appears that when he was touring Spain, inspecting the copies of the sacred books at all the chief temples of the five provinces, he recognized Almo in the arena at Corduba. He at once used all the influence in his power to arrange that Elufrius should bring his gang of fighters to Rome and that their bouts should be so managed that Almo would be saved to fight before you as he did. Almo himself found this out through Elufrius since he became again a free man and in control of his fortune, and it took a great deal of money and the participation of a great many experts to uncover and prove the facts. Proved they have been to my satisfaction and Calvaster's confusion.

"Almo had expected to serve his three years in Spain and was as dismayed as possible when he found he was to be transferred to Rome. But an articled gladiator has taken oath to submit to anything, specifying death, torture, burning, wounding, flogging and more besides, an articled gladiator cannot object to fighting anywhere. Almo had to acquiesce.

"And now, having heard that it was not wholly his fault that you were so cruelly tried before all of us, will you not agree to say farewell to him a second time?"

In the flood-tide of her revulsion of feeling Brinnaria could refuse Aurelius nothing. The Emperor gave a signal and Almo was ushered in as he had been six years before.

Brinnaria's eager scrutiny could detect no limp in his gait, could barely descry the scar on his chin, even when she knew so well where to look for it. She noted that he looked well, vigorous and very handsome in

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his gilded armor and scarlet cloak. She contrasted their magnificent surroundings with the rough frontier to which he was going.

Almo tried to speak and choked.

"Caius," she said, "the Emperor has told me how it all came about. Don't ask me to forgive; I ask your pardon for misconceiving you; I have nothing to forgive in you. If you are what I believe you to be I shall never have to forgive anything from you. Go, and with the help of the blessed gods, prove yourself all you ought to be. Farewell!"

And Almo, as he bowed, managed to say:

"Farewell!"

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CHAPTER XVI

VAGARY

TERENTIA FLAVOLA, who was taken as a Vestal to fill Meffia's place, was a really beautiful girl. Her hair was golden hair in fact, not merely in name; her eyes were an intense, bright blue; her complexion was exquisite, the delicate texture and perfect whiteness of her skin emphasized by the healthful coloring which came and went on her cheeks. Every one of the Vestals fell in love with her at once, most of all Brinnaria. Besides her good looks Terentia had a charming disposition, a pretty unconsciousness of herself and a winning deferentialness towards her elders. The combination made her irresistible.

Also she was an interesting child, being amazingly precocious, not as Brinnaria had been, in growth and behavior, for she was a complete child in all respects, but in being what moderns call an infant prodigy. Infant prodigies in ancient times displayed their unusual powers chiefly by recitations, mostly of poems, which they learned by rote and repeated with very little understanding of what they rehearsed. More than most of her kind Terentia comprehended what she declaimed, but she knew by heart many poems entirely beyond her childish grasp. At barely eight years of age she was able to reel off without hesitation or effort any one of an amazingly long list. With little prompting she could recite some of the longest narrative poems in Latin

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literature and she needed prompting only to give her the cue words at the beginning of each book and of each important episode.

Besides her amazing powers as a reciter she was already proficient in Greek, talked it easily and knew many poems in that language, which all educated Romans spoke and which was used more than Latin at Court.

But her chief distinction came from her capability as a musician. In music she was not only an infant prodigy, but very much of a born genius. Her memory for any composition she heard once was unfailingly accurate; her rendition of anything she knew was more than perfect, since to perfection of rendition she added sympathetic interpretation. She was already reputed the best female performer on the lyre, the most popular instrument in ancient times. The lyre had an effect something between that of a guitar and a harp, with some of the characteristics of the modern banjo, zither and mandolin.

Since the lyre was looked upon as frivolous and unsuited to the gravity of a Vestal, Brinnaria introduced Terentia to the organ. This instrument the child had heard, but had not learned to play, as organs were expensive in those days, whereas Terentia's family, although of the most ancient nobility, were in very straitened circumstances.

To the organ Terentia took with great enthusiasm, and in performing on it she soon surpassed her teacher. Brinnaria's playing on the water-organ was similar to the piano music of a modern girl who has mostly taught herself and who plays largely by ear; Terentia played it as a born genius in our days plays her piano, with impeccable exactitude, inimitable individuality and

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compelling charm. Her organ recitals were soon a chief feature of the social life in the Atrium, each thronged by the most fashionable ladies in Rome, who competed for invitations. Her vogue in no way spoiled Terentia, who played with just as much zest for her co-inmates of the Atrium, or when she was entirely alone amusing herself at the organ. Teaching her, playing with her, listening to her, took up a good deal of Brinnaria's time and came to be a great solace and comfort to her.

Even more was this abundance of good music a solace and a comfort to Causidiena, for, like Dossonia, her predecessor, like so many former Chief Vestals, Causidiena was going blind from some disorder slow, painless and obscure, altogether baffling to the best medical and surgical skill.

For much of the ritual of Vesta and much of the participation of the Vestals in the public worship in general, the presence of the Chief Vestal was essential. She was *the* Vestal, the others were only her assistants and in training to succeed her. But as Causidiena became less and less able to see, all matters which could be attended to by others devolved more and more upon Numisia. Among her colleagues Numisia had greatest confidence in Brinnaria, so that Brinnaria's duties occupied her insistently.

Besides her ritual duties and her music she kept up her interest in horse-racing; in fact, she became more and more devoted to this pastime, which Lutorius countenanced, but which her detractors characterized as indelicate.

The success of her venture was notable. She became an important local dealer in racers. Her colts, sold at well-advertised auctions, were sought after, were

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competed for, brought fancy prices, won many races, came to have a reputation that spread beyond the city, over all Italy, even into the provinces. Her career as a stock farmer was brilliant, meteoric, phenomenal.

Between her duties, her music and her horse-breeding Brinnaria's mind was pretty well occupied. She had no time to brood and passed six contented and almost happy years.

She had reason for happiness in the fact that reports from Almo were uniformly good. To Flexinna he wrote at intervals and his letters reached their destination without much irregularity. In those days communication with Britain was by no means so easy as with Africa. Gaul was a country well Romanized and very populous, busy and prosperous. All across it were good roads, excellent bridges and frequent post houses. But between Italy and Gaul were the Alps, where the winter snows blocked the roads for months at a time and where avalanches and floods suspended traffic at unpredictable intervals at all times of the year. The only sure road uniting Italy and Gaul was not through the Alps but past them along the sea-coast, and that was roundabout.

At the other end of Gaul the sea interposed a barrier which the Romans found annoying. In the state of seamanship in those ages a head-wind was an insuperable obstacle. As long as the wind blew the wrong way there was nothing to do but wait for the wind to change. High winds made navigation altogether impossible. Between storms and head-winds, on more than half the days in the year attempting the passage of the channel was not to be thought of. Moreover, bitter experience had taught the Romans that the weather-signs of the Mediterranean were not to be re-

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lied on when one dealt with Atlantic weather conditions. In particular they found that a clear sky, a light breeze, warm air and a calm sea in the morning not infrequently heralded a terrible storm before dusk. Consequently their attempts to cross from Gaul to Britain or from Britain to Gaul were restricted to occasions when, at and after sunset, the sky was clear, the sea calm and the wind favorable. Only under those circumstances could they be reasonably sure of the conditions remaining unaltered until the transit was accomplished. In practice about sixty-five nights in a year promised well for traffic. With sea transit so restricted, communication with Britain was infrequent, and news of Almo irregular.

Besides his letters to Flexinna he wrote occasionally to Vocco. Vocco also had hopes of hearing from some of his comrades in arms. But as Valentia was a place of semi-exile for incompetent, illiterate, drunken and reckless officers, small reliance could be placed on any such channel of news.

Therefore, with Brinnaria's knowledge and at her expense, Vocco had arranged to have an unremitting watch kept on Almo by skillful hirelings of the Imperial information department. These men sent messages whenever it was possible, and their reports were consistently favorable.

The frontier of Caledonia offered no such opportunities for distinction and promotion as the outskirts of the Sahara had afforded. Military duty from the Forth to the Clyde was monotonous and wearisome. But, considering his environment, Almo did very well. He was liked by his companions, loved by his subordinates and worshipped by his men. What there was to do he did capably, and in his leisure, among comrades who

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guzzled wine and gambled like madmen, he was always sober and never abused the dice, which were an inevitable social feature of all Roman outpost existence.

Aurelius spent the last four years of his life along the headwaters of the Danube and Rhine, where the rising tide of Germanic migrations beat incessantly at the out-works of the Empire. His death at Vienna occurred when Brinnaria was twenty-nine years old and had been nineteen years a Vestal. He was succeeded by his son Antoninus, whose obliging disposition and easy-going manners made him exceedingly popular with his cronies, the young fops, dandies and sports of Roman society, and led to his being known among them as "the good fellow," which nickname of "Commodus" soon supplanted his given names and official titles, on the lips first of the Romans, then of the Italians, soon of all his subjects everywhere.

Commodus was not in Rome when his father died and it was therefore not possible for Brinnaria to have an audience with him. She dreaded that a change of governors in Britain might work unfavorably for Almo. In consultation with Vocco she did what she could, through the city Prefect in charge of Rome during the Emperor's absence, and through other officials, to make sure that any new governor of Britain would be fully informed of the secret instructions which Aurelius had given Opstorius concerning Almo. She also did all that was possible to have Commodus reminded of the matter. This was difficult at a distance and a delicate undertaking at any time and in any place, no Emperor ever relishing the assumption that he need be reminded of anything, while the necessity for emphasis and secrecy at one and the same time taxed the best ingenuity.

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With the great influence possessed by the Vestals, they hoped that they had succeeded.

But when Commodus had been Emperor a little over a year, Brinnaria, as she descended from her carriage at Vocco's door, felt a thrill of vague foreboding. On entering the house her premonition of something wrong intensified. At first sight Flexinna's face confirmed her suspicions. However, she asked no questions and worked off her feelings by a series of high dives, followed by fancy-stroke swimming under water. She came up from her tenth plunge sufficiently exhausted to feel to some extent soothed.

As they composed themselves on the dining-sofas Vocco and Flexinna exchanged glances. Brinnaria did not wait for either to speak.

"I am afraid," she said, "that my appetite is not as reliable as it was ten years ago. I think we had best eat our dinner first and discuss our bad news afterwards."

Vocco and Flexinna looked distinctly relieved.

Brinnaria's appetite seemed excellent. She ate abundantly, and, after the dinner tray was removed and the dessert tray brought in, she relished a half a dozen of her favorite purple figs. Savoring her glass of Vocco's exquisite Setian wine she asked:

"What has gone wrong, Quintus?"

"Just precisely what we feared has happened," Vocco replied. "In spite of all our efforts Hostidius appears to have known nothing whatever about Almo's peculiar past or of the special instructions Aurelius gave Opstorius.

"Almo has practically repeated the vagary he perpetrated at Hippo. He induced Hostidius to give him a full, honorable discharge from the army and later

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wheedled the governor into authorizing him to have himself sold as a slave."

"What maggot can he have in his brain," Brinnaria burst in, "that he is so fascinated with the idea of being sold as a slave? What earthly basis can there be for the enticement it holds out to him? Being sold as a slave is universally regarded as the worst fate that can befall a man in life. What makes the prospect of life as a slave so alluring to him?"

"Flexinna and I have been debating that point," said Vocco, "but we cannot so much as think up a conjecture.

"As to the facts there can be no doubt. He was publicly sold in the market-place of Eboracum."

"At least," Brinnaria breathed, "we have not lost track of him this time."

"We have not," Vocco answered, "and I'll wager we shall not."

"Is it prize-fighting again?" Brinnaria queried, "or is it really charioteering this time?"

"Neither," said Vocco. "I must say it sounds like lunacy. But all Almo's words and all the small details of his behavior show no signs of derangement. Up to the last report he slept well, ate well, looked well, talked sensibly, in respect to all minor matters acted like a rational being, and seemed to thrive. But what he did in the large sense appears incredible.

"He had himself advertised for sale as an expert farm overseer, was bought by a prosperous proprietor whose properties are situated in the southwestern part of Britain and there, near Ischalis, he has settled down to the management of a large estate; large at least for that part of the world. He was giving excellent satisfaction in his dealings with the slaves and by his

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knowledge of budding, grafting, transplanting and of all the mysteries of gardening, orchard lore, and of agriculture in general."

"Yes," Brinnaria reflected, "he was keen on all that sort of thing while he was at the villa near Falerii. Such knowledge, gained in boyhood, sinks in deep and is never forgotten. He is not playing a part or pretending; he is really enjoying farm life. But what kink in his head makes him fancy that he prefers to enjoy it as a slave rather than as a free man? That puzzles me. Why be sold as a slave in order to bask in rural delights when he could buy the ten largest estates in Britain and never feel the outlay? When after his honorable discharge from the army he was at liberty to remain in Britain openly and to do as he liked? Can you see through it?"

Flexinna and Vocco agreed that they saw no glimmer of light.

"At least," Brinnaria summed up, "he is in Britain and we can arrange to prevent his leaving the island. Certainly we can have him watched, wherever he goes."

Vocco at once set about making the arrangements to ensure that Almo would not leave Britain. Within a half year he had to report that their efforts had been futile.

"We were too late," he said. "He did not remain at Ischalis a year. Egnatius Probus, of Fregellæ, had been in Britain more than ten years as adviser to the tax-department. His health had given way and he was taking the waters at Aquæ Solis. He was an acquaintance of Almo's owner and went down to Ischalis after his water-cure had had its effect and he felt better. While visiting and idling at Ischalis he took a fancy to Almo, offered a high price for him and bought

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him. He returned home by way of Marseilles and from there by ship to Puteoli. He is now on his estates near Fregellæ and Almo is his head overseer, in charge of the entire place. He has been there three months already."

Brinnaria fidgeted on her sofa, for, as on the previous occasion, Vocco had imparted his news after dinner.

"Give me another goblet of that Setian you bought from Zælis," she said. "I'm getting to be a confirmed wine-bibber. At every piece of bad news I need a bracer."

After she had emptied her glass, she burst out:

"If Almo is acting as villicus of an estate near Fregellæ he must be living with some slave-woman or other."

"He is not," Vocco informed her. "I made careful inquiries on just that point and got my information from two different sources. Almo told Egnatius that he was a woman-hater and could not endure a woman about him. Egnatius humored him and he is acting villicus without any villica. The wife of the assistant overseer does whatever is necessary in the way of prayers and sacrifices and such duties of a villica. She and her husband occupy the overseer's house and Almo is living in the hut meant for the assistant villicus."

"Did anybody ever hear the like!" exclaimed Brinnaria. Vocco's agents verified this news and made it quite certain that Almo was masquerading as a slave and as a villicus of a fine estate in lower Latium, near Fregellæ, southeast of Rome on the Latin highroad, about half way between Capua and the capital.

Brinnaria found herself very much in a quandary, and discussions with Flexinna and Vocco, however lengthy and however often repeated, left her just where

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she started. They could not decide whether it was best to do nothing or to interfere, and whether, if they were to interfere, what form their intervention should take.

Should Vocco travel to Fregellæ and force an interview with Almo and try to appeal to his better self? If so, should he do so without apprizing Egnatius of the real name and origin of his overseer? Or should they enlighten Egnatius under a pledge of secrecy and afterwards decide whether or not to make an attempt to recall Almo to his natural way of life? Should they do any of these things without appealing to the Emperor or would it be better first to inform Commodus? They debated over and over every line of conduct any one of them could suggest. After all complete inaction and entire secrecy seemed best.

This view was confirmed when Brinnaria consulted Celsianus, the most reputed physician of Rome. She had already confided in Lutorius, who informed Celsianus, arranged for an interview and was present at it.

The great man said: "Almo is not necessarily or even probably deranged. On the face of what you tell me the most unfavorable conjecture I could form would be that he has resolved to commit suicide. You will say that the idea is absurd, that suicide is easy and that the means are always at hand, which is quite true. But there are cases, more numerous than you could fancy, of persons who make up their minds to bring about their end in some unimaginable manner, of which nobody but themselves would ever have thought. Then they lay complicated plans and by devious ways approach their purpose. If they are thwarted or diverted, they never end their lives in any other fashion than by the special method they have devised.

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"I am inclined to think that Almo's entrance into a gang of sword-fighters was caused by some such intention, that he is alive because the circumstances he looked forward to never conspired to give him just the kind of death he preferred. I am inclined to think that he is now working towards some unthinkable exit from life.

"But I am not much disposed to think his such a case at all. It may be a mere whim of self-torment, or it may be spontaneous yielding to a genuine liking for the life he is living. What one human being likes cannot be realized by other human beings, in many cases.

"My advice is to let him entirely alone. If you interfere you may precipitate his suicide, if he meditates suicide. By calling in the help of the Emperor or of his owner or both, you may destroy the chances, the very good chances, of his returning to his full senses. Men in his state of mind are often sane in all respects, and, if unsettled, are deranged only in one particular. They are generally wholly reasonable on all points except as to their fad of the moment. If that wears off they are entirely rational. Let him alone. Watch him, but take no other steps."

This advice seemed simple enough, but carrying it out proved more of a strain than Brinnaria could have foreseen. The knowledge that Almo was in Italy, near Fregellæ, actually in Latium and within seventy miles of Rome, that he was living in the hut of an under-farm-bailiff, that he perhaps purposed some eccentric method of suicide proved racking to her nerves. She became irritable and fidgety, her music failed to solace or comfort her and sometimes almost bored her. She groped blindly for something to distract her mind.

First she had a brief but violent attack of solicitude

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for her pauper tenants. She found entertainment in visiting her slum properties and in endeavoring to alleviate the condition of their inmates. They were far from grateful. To have a Vestal, clad in the awe-inspiring dignity of her white robes, with all her badges of office, six braids, headdress, headband, tassels, ribbons, brooch and all descend from her dazzlingly upholstered carriage and invade the courtyard of their hive was thrilling but still more disconcerting to a swarm of slum-spawn. They bragged of the honor for the rest of their lives and strutted over it for months, but they were unaffectedly relieved to see her depart. Her inquiries as to their means of livelihood were excruciatingly embarrassing. The Roman populace, all freemen with their wives and children, were legally entitled to free seats at the spectacles and to cooked rations from the government cook-shops in their precinct. They throve on their free rations. Of their own efforts they had merely to clothe themselves and pay the rent of their quarters. Cash for rent and garments they obtained in whatever way happened to be easiest, often by dubious means. As to their resources they were reticent.

In particular, Brinnaria was unable to cajole any admission, by word or silence, from any dweller in one of her largest rookeries, and they were better off than any tenants she had, too. What was more, not one of their neighbors would impart any information about them.

Brinnaria's curiosity was aroused. She bethought herself of Truttidius, the sieve-maker, and of his intimate knowledge of all the dens and lairs in the city. She asked him. He laughed.

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"On the Fagutal?" he made sure, "at the second corner beyond the end of the Subura?"

He laughed again.

Then he tactfully explained that the tenants in that particular congeries of buildings were professional secret cut-throats, good enough husbands and fathers and amicable among themselves, but earning an honest livelihood by putting out of the way any persons displeasing to anybody able to pay for their services.

Brinnaria abruptly ceased slumming.

All the more she threw herself into her horse-breeding. She visited her stud-farms oftener; and, oddly enough, as the result of her overwrought state of mind, the management of the farms themselves came to mean less to her than the means of reaching them and returning. She paid close attention to the make of her road-carriage, to the speed and pace of her roadsters. She bought picked teams of blooded mares, selecting them especially for their ability to keep up a fast walk without breaking pace. She boasted that she had six spans of mares, any one of which could, at a walk, outdistance any team in Rome owned by anybody else.

By specializing in fast-walking cattle she saved much time in passing from the Atrium to the city gates and in returning.

Outside the city her mares displayed their capacity for other paces than the walk. She saw to it that her coachman kept them at their utmost speed. The sight of her tearing along a highway became familiar everywhere throughout the suburban countryside. She made a hobby of extremely fast driving and of buying fast mares.

Also she fell into another fad, at the time all the rage, invented since the accession of Commodus and

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made fashionable by the young Emperor. Some popinjay had conceived a whim for travelling by litter instead of in his carriage. It was far less expeditious and far more expensive. But the notion took. All at once every fop in Roman society must needs take his country outings, go to his villa and come back from it, not in his carriage but in his litter. The plea was that a carriage jolted and that riding in a litter was less tiring. There was something in that, for carriage springs had not been invented in those days. But mostly it was just a craze among the very wealthy, as distinguishing them from people who could afford but one set of litter-bearers. An ordinary four-man litter could be used only for going about the city—longer distances were impossible, and excursions into the country soon tired out eight bearers. For road travelling one must have sixteen bearers, two sets relieving each other in turn. Brinnaria bought sixteen gigantic negroes and tested them on her inspections of her stock-farms. She tried German bearers, Goths and Cilicians. Her bearers became famous for their speed and endurance. If she heard of any squad reputed better than hers, she bought it at any price, until, not counting the teams of bearers belonging to the Palace, there was only one gang in Rome which she envied. She tried to purchase them but could not. They belonged to her mother's friend Nemestronia.

Nemestronia always had been a wonder and was a marvel. She was one of the wealthiest women in Rome and had never been ill a moment in her life. A very beautiful girl, she had kept her looks and a wonderful singing voice, still clear and sweet when she was over sixty. She had been, since within a year after her first marriage, one of the social leaders of Rome. She had

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become *the* social leader of Rome, her influence almost equal to that of the Empress. She had outlived three empresses and had reigned unquestioned in the social world for over fifty years, yet had not an enemy in Rome. Everybody loved Nemestronia. At the time of the litter craze she had already celebrated her eighty-first birthday, was plump, rosy, merry and spry, always ready for any amusement, and was living happily with her fifth husband.

She prided herself on her litter-bearers and with her unerring social instinct anticipated the caprice of her world and provided herself with three sets of carriers, sixteen to a set. One gang, of brawny Cappadocians, outclassed any but the Emperor's own.

These Brinnaria tried to buy, tried in vain. Nemestronia was willing to exchange, if she could do so to her advantage. But sell she would not. Amid her opulence no sum could tempt her.

Brinnaria fumed and drove her horses almost to death, urged her litter-men almost to exhaustion. But, with all her haste, care outpaced her steeds or carriers. She gnawed her heart out.

Only at Vocco's house, amid Flexinna's bevy of youngsters, did she find peace of mind.

Even there, at last, care followed her.

When Almo had been more than a year at Fregellæ, Brinnaria, visiting Flexinna about the middle of May, scented more trouble. As they lay down to dinner she said:

"The occasion, I perceive, calls for an extra supply of wine. Let it be the old Falernian this time and have the mixture strong."

After they had eaten, none any too heartily, Vocco told his news.

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Almo had left his master's estate without a permit, in plain words had gone off like any runaway slave and had thereby exposed himself to the penalties incurred by a fugitive. Egnatius had taken the usual steps to recapture him, but neither he nor the authorities had any clue to Almo's whereabouts. As far as they were concerned he had vanished.

He had not, however, eluded the vigilance of Brinnaria's agents, of the men Vocco had employed to keep him in view. They understood that Egnatius was to be kept in ignorance of their activity, and gave no aid to the police of the neighborhood in their efforts to retake him. They had reported only to Vocco.

Almo had money with him and at Arpinum had garbed himself decently for the road. He avoided the main highway and wandered along by-roads, zigzagging and circling about. He idled at inns, sometimes for days in one place, often in small towns, oftener at road-houses between.

He was then near Atina.

At intervals during June and July Vocco gave Brinnaria reports about Almo. He seemed to enjoy the society of the casual travellers he met at small inns and of the local frequenters of them. He got on famously with everybody. Nowhere was he suspected of being a runaway slave and naturally, for he had the unmistakable carriage and bearing of a born freeman. The hue and cry Egnatius had set loose after him was active wherever he went, but he sat under placards offering rewards for his capture and no one applied the description to him.

Early in June he was at Casinum and Interamna, before it ended at Fundi and Privernum. In July he passed through Setia, Ulubræ, Norba and Cora. Early

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in August he was idling at Velitræ, playing quoits in the inn-yard morning after morning.

He seemed to like Velitræ. He stayed there longer than anywhere else.

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CHAPTER XVII

RECKLESSNESS

ON the fifteenth of that same August, not long after noon, Brinnaria was much surprised by a call from Flexinna.

"The most amazing weather that ever was," Flexinna stated. "I never heard of such, everybody says nobody ever heard of the like. Even Nemestronia says she never saw or heard of anything to compare to it. The densest imaginable fog, as white as milk. You c-c-can't see across a street, you c-c-can hardly see the bearers in front of your litter."

"I noticed it in the courtyard," Brinnaria replied, "and it is thicker than usual. But we often have morning fogs and I have seen several almost as dense as this."

"Nothing unusual in a fog d-d-down hereabouts and along the river," Flexinna admitted. "B-B-But this fog is most unusual. It is all over the whole city. I have lived on the Esquiline ever since I was b-b-born and I never saw a fog up there except p-p-perhaps a whiff just about sunrise and then only in wisps. This fog is high up on the Esquiline, as d-d-dense as along the river. I know the fog is all over the city b-b-because I sent two slaves to the P-P-Pincian and two to the Aventine, and they reported that it is just as b-b-bad everywhere as here and at home. And I met Satronius Satro, just b-b-back from B-B-Baiæ. He

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slept at B-B-Bovillæ last night and he says the fog is just as b-b-bad all the way from B-B-Bovillæ. He says it is heavy over the whole c-c-country for miles. It amounts to a portent."

"Flexinna," said Brinnaria, "you never came here and at this time of day, to talk about the weather."

"I d-d-didn't know how to b-b-begin," Flexinna admitted.

"What has Almo done now?" Brinnaria queried.

"He left Velitræ day before yesterday," said Flexinna, "and went to Aricia. Yesterday he challenged the K-K-King of the G-G-Grove."

"Just as Celsianus conjectured," Brinnaria groaned. "Some unthinkable method of suicide. Is he dead?"

"No," Flexinna replied. "He's very much alive."

"Then he is the King of the Grove!" Brinnaria cried.

"They haven't fought yet," Flexinna informed her.

"Impossible!" Brinnaria exclaimed. "Or there is something wrong with your information. There is only one way to challenge the King of the Grove and that is to enter the Grove with a weapon. Almost as many men as women go to worship at the Temple of Diana in the Grove by the Lake; the King of the Grove never notices any unarmed man. But let a man with a weapon of any kind, spear, sword, or what not, even a club, step over the boundary line of the Grove and that act of entrance there with a weapon constitutes a challenge to the King of the Grove; at sight of an armed man the King of the Grove attacks him. They fight then and there till one is killed. The survivor is the King of the Grove.

"The challenger is supposed to pluck a twig from the sacred oak-tree and the act of picking the branch is supposed to be the challenge. But, in practice, the

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King of the Grove watches the sacred oak so carefully, that nobody remembers any challenger who succeeded in pulling a twig unless he won the fight.

"That is the only way to challenge the King of the Grove. Everybody knows that."

"That is just what I always thought," Flexinna confessed, "b-b-but, it seems we are b-b-both mistaken. There is another way to challenge the K-K-King of the G-G-Grove; that is to go to the Dictator of Aricia and enter formal challenge. In that c-c-case, the Dictator notifies the K-K-King of the G-G-Grove that he must face the challenger at midnight next d-d-day. Meanwhile, the challenger is entertained in the t-t-town-hall of Aricia. He is b-b-bathed, p-p-provided with fresh c-c-clothing, g-g-given whatever food he asks for and accommodated with a c-c-comfortable b-b-bed for the night after his challenge. Then, when he has had a g-g-good chance to sleep all night and has had at least four g-g-good meals, he is c-c-conducted by the aldermen to the G-G-Grove just b-b-before midnight. The aldermen t-t-take with them two ancient shields, p-p-precisely alike, and two ancient Amazonian b-b-battle-axes, also p-p-precisely alike, which are k-k-kept among the t-t-treasures in the strong-room of the t-t-town hall at Aricia. The challenger plucks a t-t-twig from the sacred oak. Then he and the K-K-King of the G-G-Grove face each other in the open space b-b-before it. A shield and a b-b-battle-axe are handed to each. Then they wait for the word of the Dictator of Aricia. At the word they fight.

"That is the other way to challenge the K-K-King of the G-G-Grove."

Flexinna, as generally happened, had been shown at once up to Brinnaria's private apartment and had

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walked straight into Brinnaria's bedroom. In that small room they sat facing each other.

"Then they fight at midnight to-night," Brinnaria deduced.

"Yes," Flexinna corroborated.

"How did you come here?" her friend queried.

"In Nemestronia's litter," the visitor answered. "I b-b-borrowed it."

"With her Cappadocian bearers?" queried Brinnaria.

"Eighteen of them," said Flexinna; "two extras."

"How on earth did you come to do that?" Brinnaria wondered.

"I had a notion," Flexinna explained, "of trying to get to the G-G-Grove by the Lake b-b-before the fight. I thought p-p-perhaps Almo would listen to me if I c-c-could see him in t-t-time."

"Did you tell Quintus?" Brinnaria demanded.

"Of c-c-course," said Flexinna. "He wanted to go alone, b-b-but I said Almo would not listen to him, so I p-p-persuaded him to let me t-t-try. I c-c-couldn't think of riding, of c-c-course, as I am. He wouldn't even hear of my d-d-driving, said I might as well hang myself and be d-d-done with it as risk the jar of a t-t-travelling c-c-carriage. I said I'd use my litter. He said our b-b-bearers c-c-could never g-g-get there in t-t-time for me to hope to d-d-do any g-g-good. I said I'd b-b-borrow Nemestronia's fastest gang. He said he c-c-could g-g-go and c-c-come b-b-back on a horse quicker than any litter c-c-could reach the G-G-Grove. I repeated that Almo would certainly p-p-pay no attention to him, b-b-but might listen to me. So I b-b-borrowed Nemestronia's litter. Shall I g-g-go? Shall I start at once?"

"No!" Brinnaria cut her off. "Let me think. Six-

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teen miles? They could do it in a little over five hours, if everything went just right. They'd take at least eight hours for the return journey. You wouldn't be back at the Appian gate before sunrise. It would be a hungry job."

"I thought of that," Flexinna informed her. "I'm always ravenous when I'm this way and c-c-can never g-g-go from one meal to the next. I had a k-k-kid-skin of wine p-p-put in the litter and b-b-bread and cheese and fruit."

"You did!" cried Brinnaria. "Where is Vocco?"

"On horseback b-b-beside the litter," said Flexinna, "waiting for your d-d-decision."

"I've made it," Brinnaria proclaimed.

"Shall I g-g-go t-t-try?" enquired Flexinna.

"No!" Brinnaria fairly shouted, pulling off her headdress.

"What shall I d-d-do then?" Flexinna queried.

"Undress," Brinnaria ordered, "undress quick!"

Flexinna stared at her, horrified.

"What for?" she quavered.

"Undress first and ask afterwards," Brinnaria commanded. "Undress, woman, undress!"

She was tearing off her clothes as she talked.

"Can't you see, you fool!" she hissed. "The gods have made it all easy. The densest fog Rome ever saw and all over the country-side, a curtained litter with the fastest bearers alive right at my door, my best friend on horseback beside it, drink and food enough and to spare, me off duty till to-morrow noon, and you here to change clothes with me. I put on your clothes and go save Almo."

"You'll be outside Rome all night," Flexinna objected. "That's sacrilege."

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"Not a bit of it," Brinnaria retorted. "I know a regulation from a taboo. When the Gauls captured Rome the Flamen of Jupiter went up into the Capitol with the garrison. He might not leave Rome, it would have been impious. But the other flamens and the Vestals left Rome, the Vestals were months at Cære. It is not impiety for a Vestal to be outside the city walls over night, it is merely forbidden by the rules. I'm going."

"You might as well g-g-go b-b-bury yourself alive and b-b-be d-d-done with it," Flexinna protested. "You're certain to b-b-be found out. It's sure d-d-death for you."

"Hang the risk!" Brinnaria snarled. "I never realized how much I loved Almo till you brought this news. I don't care whether I live or die or what death I die, if I can only save him.

"And the risk is too small to think of. All you have to do is to stay abed and keep still. Utta will never tell and she won't let any one in. Numisia will not suspect anything: any Vestal has the right to twenty-four hours abed and no questions asked, Meffia spent one day out of ten in bed. Manlia takes a day's rest a dozen times a year. Even I have done it several times, when I was sore all over with jolting too long at full gallop over our so-called perfect roads. I was abed all day about a month ago, and certainly I drove hard enough and long enough yesterday and I was in the Temple half the night. I'll be back here long before noon to-morrow.

"Don't you see how easy it is? Flexinna has called on Brinnaria to-day, as usual, except the hour. And Flexinna often calls on Brinnaria at odd hours. Flexinna makes a short call and goes out to her litter.

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Flexinna makes an excursion into the country in a litter with drawn curtains, her husband riding by it. Nobody can take any notice of that. Flexinna returns from her outing, calls at once on Brinnaria, pays a brief call, goes out, gets into her litter and goes home. Brinnaria, refreshed by twenty-four hours abed, goes about her duties. The plan simply can't fail."

She had on all Flexinna's clothes by the end of her explanation and was adjusting her two veils, one over her face, the other tied over the broad-brimmed travelling-hat, so that the edges of the brim, drawn down on either side, almost met under her chin and her face was lost in it.

Flexinna continued to protest feebly, but Brinnaria made her compose herself in the bed.

"You can have anything you want to eat," she reminded her, "and as much as you want, any time."

Utta came at the first signal.

"Now listen," Brinnaria instructed her, "I am in that bed and I am going to stay there until the lady who has just called on me comes back. That will be tomorrow morning. I am tired and need rest, the same as I did the day after the axle broke and I barked my knee in the gravel. I am not going out now; oh, no, the lady going out is the lady who called on me. Do you understand?"

Utta understood.

Flexinna, quaking in the bed, prayed under her breath.

"For Castor's sake," was her farewell, "d-d-don't forget to s-s-stutter."

In a fashionable costume of brilliant pink silk with pearly gray trimmings, feeling horribly conspicuous,

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but unaccosted and, as far as she could judge, unnoticed, Brinnaria descended the stairs, traversed the courtyard and passed the portal. Just outside, in the nook left by the angle of the wall enclosing the Temple, she found the litter set down clear of the throng that surged and jostled ceaselessly up and down the Holy Street. The bearers stood about it, one holding Vocco's horse; all, like the street-crowd, vague and unreal in the fog. Through the fog Vocco strode towards her and checked, amazed. She put her fingers to the folds of the veil over her lips.

"C-C-Careful," she warned him, laboriously stuttering. "I am Flexinna come back. Now for Aricia, as fast as the b-b-bearers can hoof it."

Vocco, dazed, helped her into the litter, gave the order and mounted his horse.

Composed in her litter, Brinnaria's sensations were all of the strangeness of the outlook; fog blurring the outlines of familiar buildings; fog hiding the landmarks she looked for, fog wrapping her round till she could hardly see the front pair of carriers tramping ahead or even Vocco beside her on his horse; fog concealing all the wide prospect of the levels south of Rome, fog so thick that they positively groped their way through the towns along the road, fog so dense that she could not discern the gradations by which afternoon melted into evening and dusk into darkness.

When they were clear of the city Vocco ranged his horse alongside the litter and expostulated with Brinnaria, talking Greek that the bearers might not understand.

"The best thing you can do," he said, "is to give up this hare-brained adventure and merely swing round

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through the suburbs for some hours and return to the Atrium by some other gate."

"Not I," she replied in her hardest tone.

"How do you expect to succeed in speaking to Almo?" he asked.

"I leave that to you," she said; "you must manage to see the Dictator of Aricia and tell him that you have with you a lady in a litter who must speak to the challenger before the fight."

"I'll attempt the commission," said Vocco, "and I'll do my utmost, but I hold it impossible."

"In any case," spoke Brinnaria, "I keep on even if I have to expose myself and be recognized in Aricia."

Vocco gave up the effort to influence her.

The roads joining the Appian Way were paved with similar blocks of the same sort of stone. In the fog they went wrong three several times where side-roads branched off at a thin angle. In each case they failed to discover their mistake until they had gone on for some distance; in each case they had to retrace their steps for fear of getting wholly lost if they tried a cross-road; in each case they wasted much time.

Twice the leading bearers were all but trampled on by the recklessly driven horses of careless drivers. Both times the mix-up delayed them.

Just beyond Bovillæ they had a third collision, in which one pole of the litter was snapped and two of the bearers injured. It barely missed resulting in a free-fight. All of Vocco's tact was needed to allay the feelings on both sides. By great good luck he succeeded in getting a substitute litter-pole from a near-by inn without too much publicity.

The delays caused by missing the road and by collisions had cut down the margin of time they had hoped

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for at Aricia. This last misfortune delayed them so much that it seemed unlikely that they could reach the Grove until midnight.

In fact, before they reached Aricia, the road was alive with parties of celebrants, men and women, but no children, every man carrying a lighted torch, nearly every man accompanied by a slave with an armful or a back-load of spare torches, all moving in the same direction with them.

With torch-bearing crowds the streets of Aricia were jammed. From gate to gate of the town they crawled, wading slowly through the press of revellers. Along the road to the Grove they were as a chip floated along on a tide of torchbearers, for the parties of worshippers converging to their great local yearly festival from Tusculum, Tibur, Cora, Pometia, Lanuvium and Ardea formed a continuous procession, their pulsing torch-flames looking strange and blurred through the fog.

When they reached the top of the ridge enclosing the Lake, Vocco dismounted and trusted his roan to one of Nemestronia's extra bearers, as horses were not allowed within the Grove or its precincts.

Not much before midnight the bearers swung sharply at the brink of the cliff and plunged down the steep narrow road cut along its face. Brinnaria felt the dampness of the lake air on her cheek.

By the Lake the fog was, if possible, more impenetrable than elsewhere. The Grove, the lodging for the cripples and invalids who thronged the place to be cured, the vast halls about the temple, the temple itself, all were doubly whelmed in the darkness and the mist.

Brinnaria made out only the six channelled vermilion columns of the temple portico and the black boughs of

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the sacred oak. These, to right and left of the temple area, showed vaguely in the light of thousands of torches in the hands of the throng packed about it. Respect for a closed litter with sixteen bearers accompanied by a gentleman in a Senator's robes won them a way through the crowd, the torches surging in waves of flame as they ploughed through.

When they reached the margin of the open space, Brinnaria, choking with the realization that she had arrived too late, peered between the drawn curtains of her litter and saw the pavement of the temple-area bright under the splendor of the torch-rays; saw a dozen young women, dressed in gowns of a startling deep orange, standing in a row clear of the torch-bearing crowd; saw the five aldermen of Aricia in their official robes, grouped about the square marble altar; saw before the altar a circular space of clipped turf midway of the area pavement, saw standing on it to the right of the altar the King of the Grove, clad in his barbaric smock of dingy undyed black wool, his three-stranded necklace of raw turquoises broad on his bosom, the fox-tails of his fox-skin cap trailing by his ears; saw facing him Almo, bare-kneed, his hunting-boots of soft leather like chamois-skin coming half way up to his calves, his leek-green tunic covering him only to mid-thigh, his head bare, his right hand waving an oak bough.

After she recognized Almo and glimpsed the bough in his hand she hardly looked at him. She stared, fascinated, at the white marble altar on which, as an offering to Diana of the Underworld, the victor of the fight would lay the corpse of his victim.

The Dictator of Aricia, chief of the Aldermen, raised his hand. From somewhere in the darkness be-

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hind the dozen simpering wenches appeared two slaves, each carrying a small round shield and a double-headed battle-axe. The shields had painted on each a horse, the battle-axes were of the pattern always seen in pictures of the legendary Amazons. The blade of each axe-head was shaped like a crescent moon. From the inner side projected a flat, thick shank, by which the blade was fastened to the helve. The curve of each blade made almost a half circle, the tips of the crescents almost touched the haft between them, so that their outer cutting-edges made a nearly complete circle of razor-sharp steel, from which protruded the keen spear-head tipping the shaft.

Two of the aldermen received these accoutrements from the slaves. Brinnaria noticed that one of the other aldermen held the broad, gold-mounted, jeweled scabbard containing the great scimitar with which the King of the Grove kept girt, waking or sleeping. She even noted how its belt trailed from his hands and the shine of its gloss-leather in the torch-rays.

The two aldermen handed a shield and an axe to each contestant. One took from Almo the oak-bough and passed it to the Dictator.

The two champions fitted the shields on their arms, balanced them, and hefted their battle-axes. Each assumed the posture that suited him best, his feet well under him. So they stood facing each other, waiting for the signal.

The King of the Grove was a stocky, solidly-built ruffian of medium height and weight. Almo seemed much taller and very much slenderer and lighter. His delicate features and thin nose contrasted strangely to the high cheek-bones, small, close-set eyes, and wide, flat nostrils of his antagonist.

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The Dictator waved the oak-bough and shouted.

The two champions warily approached each other. Each kept his left foot forward; each crouched, as it were, inside the shield tight against his shoulder; each held his axe aloft.

Each struck, each dodged, Almo awkwardly, his axe trailing behind him after it missed.

The stocky man thought he saw his chance and whirled his weapon, bringing it down in a terrible sweep. Craftily Almo caught it against his shield, just below the upper rim, horribly it grated against the bronze plating of the shield, with the full weight of the mighty swing it buried itself in the sod.

The force of his blow carried the assailant with it so that he almost fell face forward on the sward. Before he could recover himself Almo's ready axe swung.

Brinnaria saw it flash in the air. Then she saw the fox-skin cap in two halves, a horrid red void between.

"Oh Vocco," she called, "t-t-take me home, t-t-take me home."

At that volcanic instant, at the bitterest moment of her life, what kept back her tears was her tendency to laugh at the fact, that, in the midst of her agony, she did not forget to stutter.

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CHAPTER XVIII

FURY

THE darkness of the night, the impenetrability of the fog and the weariness of the bearers all contributed to impede their return journey. While on her way and buoyed up by her wild purpose, Brinnaria had been able to rest herself by dozing along the roadway and had remembered to keep up her strength with food and wine. After they had turned back she could not have swallowed anything, if she had thought to try, and the nearest she came to sleep was an uneasy drowse which seemed a long nightmare.

The Cappadocians, famous for their strength, endurance and indifference to wakefulness, exertion, hunger or thirst, were also astute foragers. On their way from Rome the reliefs had invaded every inn they passed and, lavishly provided with small coins by Vocco, had provisioned themselves abundantly. These supplies they handed over to their fellows when they took up the litter. All the way back the spare carriers, plodding behind, munched their provender and conversed in undertones. The bearers, necessarily flagging, trudged leadenly.

Through it all Brinnaria was haunted by her memory of two pictures.

One was of the row of saffron-clad hussies watching the fight.

The King of the Grove was the only legal polygamist

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in Italy. Concomitant with the barbarous and savage conditions determining his tenure of the office as High Priest in the Grove by the Lake of Diana of the Underworld, congruent with his outlandish attire and ornaments, he had the right to have twelve wives at once. Seldom had a King of the Grove failed to avail himself of the privilege; and, indeed, to have twelve wives was regarded as incumbent upon him, as necessary to his proper sanctity and as indispensable to maintain the curative potencies of the locality, which restored to health each year an army of sufferers.

He had the power to repudiate any wife at any time, to dismiss her and expel her from the Grove. Any former wife of his, when expelled or after leaving the Grove of her own accord, became a free woman with all the privileges of a liberated slave. Most of his ex-wives, however, elected to remain in the Grove and formed a sort of corps of official nurses for the sick who flocked there to be cured. In practice the King of the Grove usually repudiated any wife who lost her youthful charms.

His wives were commonly, like himself, truant slaves. Fugitive male slaves were an ever-present feature of country life in all parts of the ancient world, as tramps are in modern times. A female runaway, however, was a distinct rarity. But the sanctuary afforded them by the Grove encouraged them about Aricia and many fled to it. If young and comely they became wives of its King. Also slave-girls were constantly being presented to him by grateful convalescents, who had come to the Grove as invalids or cripples and had left it hale and sound. Thus the twelve wives of the King were always as vital and buxom a convocation of wenches as could be found anywhere.

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The spectacle they had made haunted Brinnaria. They had been so utterly callous, so completely indifferent, so merely curious to see which contestant was to be their future master, so vacant-mindedly giggling and nudging each other. The impression they had made on her nauseated her, while the memory of their red cheeks, full contours, youthfulness and undeniable animal charm enraged her.

The other picture which had branded itself on her memory was the sight of Almo, straightening up after stooping over his butchered predecessor, clasping the triple turquoise necklace about his throat.

Almo was King of the Grove.

At that thought and at the recollection of the dozen jades wriggling and smirking, her blood boiled.

By the margin of the cliff Vocco had had much ado finding his horse. On the road back to Aricia they passed through many parties of belated worshippers. As the torch festival kept up until dawn that town was open all night. Unquestioned they passed in at a wide-open gate, through torch-lit, but almost deserted streets, out at another wide-set gate.

In the Roman world travelling by night was almost unexistent. Only imperial couriers and civilians driven by some dire stress kept on their way after sunset. In general travellers halted for the night at some convenient inn or town, or camped by the road if darkness overtook them far from any hostelry. But on the night of the yearly festival of Diana, many parties were abroad. Between Aricia and Bovillæ they met several convoys, and about half-way they were overtaken and passed by a rapidly driven carriage, and somewhat later by a troop of horsemen, trotting restrainedly,

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one of them on a white horse which showed rather distinctly, even in the fog and darkness.

Near Bovillæ they overtook the same band of horsemen, halted about the wreck of two travelling carriages which had crashed together in the fog. Two of the horses lay dead on the stones, killed to put them out of their misery. From curb to curb the pavement was cluttered with pieces of wreckage and the carcasses of the horses. The roadway was completely blocked and the bearers, at first, could find no way around the obstacle.

Some women were wailing over a little boy whose leg had been crushed and who was uttering frightful shrieks. The child screamed so terribly that Brinnaria impulsively leaned half-way out of her litter, carried away by her sympathies. Close beside her she saw the white horse and astride of it, vague in the mist, but unmistakable in his lop-sided, bony leanness, outlined against the glare of the torches behind him, she recognized Calvaster.

Instantly she shrank behind her litter curtains.

Almost at once a relief bearer who had gone to scout reported a free path through the fields by the road. They continued on their way.

Bovillæ, not being one of the towns participating in the Festival of Diana, was closed for the night, its gates shut fast, its walls dark. Going round it was a trying detour over rough cross-roads.

After they were again on the Appian Road they were for a second time overtaken by the same band of horsemen. When their hoof-beats had grown faint in the distance ahead, Vocco ranged his horse alongside the litter and asked:

"Did you notice the man on the white horse?"

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"I recognized him," said Brinnaria briefly.

The fog held all the way to the Appian Gate, which they reached as some watery sun-rays struggled through the mist, held until they reached the Atrium.

Out of her litter tumbled Brinnaria in Flexinna's rumpled finery, feeling unescapably recognizable, even inside her double veil and under her broad-brimmed, tied-down travelling hat.

But the heavy-built, sinewy slave-woman who guarded the portal of the Atrium passed her in without remark. She met no one on her way up to her suite, where she found Utta squatted outside her bedroom door.

Flexinna was incredulously delighted, pathetically overjoyed to see her.

"You have a wonderful larder here," she said. "Every single thing I asked for was b-b-brought me at once. I d-d-didn't have any appetite, b-b-but I had to have food. And I g-g-got it."

Promptly she put on her own clothing and was gone. In a trice Brinnaria was flat on her back in bed with Utta massaging her vigorously and methodically. After one comprehensive rubbing she went off for hot milk, hot wine, honey, barley-meal and spices. The posset she brewed she compelled her mistress to swallow. Then she gently massaged her until she was asleep. Thanks to these attentions Brinnaria, after some four hours abed, was able to reappear in the Temple looking not much unlike a Vestal who had enjoyed twenty-four hours of unbroken repose.

Numisia appeared to suspect nothing. Certainly she remonstrated with her and begged her not to exhaust herself so by hard riding.

After that first sleep, induced by fatigue and by Utta's ministrations, Brinnaria slept little. She tossed

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and turned. Before her eyes was continually the recollection of that row of saffron-clad minxes, of their exuberant health, heartiness and rollicking vivacity. The memory of them suffocated her. In the Atrium she had to conceal her inward convulsions of rage, had to appear calm, placid and collected.

The effort made her the more explosive when she was at Flexinna's and could speak out. She stormed.

Flexinna let her talk herself hoarse. But no amount of talking relieved her. Whatever she said, no matter how often she had said it, she wound up the same way:

"Here I am, packed in ice, so to speak, for thirty years and there he is, King of the Grove, with twelve wives, twelve wives, *twelve wives!*"

Jealousy, in its most furious form, is not a mild malady, even in our days, and in women of northern ancestry and cold blood. Brinnaria was a hot-blooded Latin and the pulses of her heart were earthquakes of fire. The Romans were a ferocious and sanguinary stock. Even among the most delicately nurtured women love turned quickly into hate and solicitude might in a brief time give place to the thirst for vengeance.

Brinnaria struggled with herself for some days. Then she bade her coachman drive her to the Fagutal. Her appearance among her tenants caused general trepidation, as usual.

When the clustering drabs and brats discovered that she felt no present interest in women and children, but that she demanded speech with the men, the elder men, their dismay deepened into acute consternation.

Since she would take no denial some dotards and striplings were routed out and the patriarch of the

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clan was thrust forward. He looked senile from his slippered feet to the shine on his bald-pate, he was blear-eyed and hard of hearing, but he understood plain Latin when he heard it, he knew of old the signs he read in the flash of her eyes, the set of her jaw and every feature as she stood or moved. Also no dog ever had a keener scent for game than he for business.

He shouted in the slang of his caste.

The women and children vanished.

Promptly a chair was brought, carefully dusted and she was invited to seat herself. Before her cringed, in attitudes of obsequious deference, a group of as hulking, truculent, ruthless villains as could have been found anywhere on earth. Just out of earshot of a low-voiced conversation, stood younger men, sentinels, to keep all others at a distance.

The patriarch's son, recognized chief of the brotherhood, an appallingly inhuman brute, acted as spokesman.

At the first word their wary expression altered to one of brotherly comprehension. There was a man to be killed. Pride in their vocation shone all over them. Yes, they knew of the King of the Grove, who did not? and they especially, since the patriarch's grandfather, great-grandfather to the spokesman, had at an advanced age ended his life in the Grove, after years as its priest, having become King late in life, the last of a long series of challengers whom the Emperor Caligula had suborned against an insufferable and all but invincible hierophant.

Could they find a swashbuckler willing to assail the present incumbent?

Of a surety; and what was more, able to vanquish anybody.

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Could it be arranged secretly?

No human being would ever suspect that she knew anything about the matter; what was more, the most inquisitive would never divine that they themselves had any hand in the change of priests at Aricia.

How could this be accomplished?

In countless ways. One might find a discontented slave, mighty and skilled with weapons, and reveal to him a means of bettering his condition, or one might bribe the owner of a capable slave to wink at his running away, or if no fit slave could be found, a suitable freeman might be induced to become a slave under a master also in the plot. It was easy, merely a matter of money.

How much money would be needed?

That would depend. If they could cajole a slave the job would call only for cash for the instigators' expenses, for journey-money and for a good sabre for the challenger, and at the last a bonus for all concerned. If a slave-owner had to be bribed, more cash and more money for bonuses would be required. If a freeman had to be employed the enterprise would be still more expensive. It was all a matter of money, above all, of cash.

Cash was forthcoming.

Brinnaria returned to the Atrium by a circuitous drive out the Tiber Gate, round through the suburbs and in at the River Gate. She needed fresh air. All the way, all the afternoon, all the wakeful night, she was in an eery state of icy, numb exaltation. It was all over—Almo was a dead man, she had avenged herself, she had vindicated the proprieties, her wrath was righteous, her vengeance laudable. This tense condition of her nerves lasted for some days.

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According to stipulation the messenger from the tenements on the Fagutal was a decently clad woman of inconspicuously respectable appearance. She came after an interval of about ten days. She was apologetic. Their first champion had perished.

Twice more she brought the same message. Then Brinnaria ventured a second visit to the unsavory locality. She was sarcastic. The chief was abashed. This, he said, was evidently a task unexpectedly difficult. The more certain was it that they would measure up to the requirements. They felt that their time-honored reputation was at stake.

There followed for Brinnaria an exciting, a wearing autumn and winter. For some months messages came to her at about nine-day intervals, all of the same tenure. Towards mid-winter, on a mild fair day, she risked a third expostulation with her hirelings. On an apologetic and humiliated rabble she poured her scorn.

Thereafter the messages came thicker, about one every four days, but monotonously unwelcome. Brinnaria set her teeth and sent all the money asked for. Meanwhile her wrath, her jealousy, her thirst for vengeance steadily waned and their place was largely taken by admiration for Almo's incredible skill and by a sort of pride in him.

But again and again the vision of the twelve baggages returned to her and she steeled her heart.

One warm June morning she lost patience and burst in on her gang of cut-throats.

Inundated by a cascade of vitriolic denunciations and stinging sneers they hung their heads, too limp to utter a protest. The patriarch was weeping openly. Turned from anger to curiosity she found the rookery was in mourning. Their chief, the apple of their eye,

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aghast at the failures of his minions, had himself undertaken to redeem their honor. For him they grieved. They owned themselves beaten. They had scoured Italy, had sent against Almo every promising bully in the fifteen districts. Their best young men had gone, lastly their adored leader. They could do no more; Almo was invincible.

Brinnaria, reflecting that, after all, she was to blame for their dejection and woe, that, after all, they had done their best, distributed what cash she had with her and promised them a lavish apportionment of gold. As she went she realized, as they realized, that the place would never see her again.

Next morning she sent for Guntello. That faithful Goth, still huge, mighty and terrific, came, mild as a pet bulldog.

"Go kill him!" she commanded.

"Certainly, Little Mistress," he acquiesced, "but whom am I to kill?"

She explained.

Guntello, always parsimonious, asked a moderate sum for the purchase of a sabre and for road-money. She gave him ten times as much.

When he was gone, she felt, as at first, a painful numbness of exaltation. Almo was now certainly a dead man.

This mood suddenly inverted itself into an uncontrollable passion of solicitude. Off she posted to Flexinna and confessed everything to Vocco. In a frenzy she demanded they again borrow Nemestronia's litter and that Vocco again accompany her to Aricia. To their expostulations she retorted that go she would, if not escorted by Vocco, then alone, if not disguised and in a borrowed litter, then in her own and openly, or

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openly in her carriage or afoot if need be; but go she would!

Flexinna succeeded in getting her to listen long enough to urge that there was no need for her to go personally, as Guntello would obey Vocco at sight of her signet ring, moreover that Guntello now had a long start and that only a swift horseman might hope to intervene in time. To these representations she yielded.

Vocco returned amazed and manifestly relieved. He had arrived too late. Guntello was dead.

That night Brinnaria wept long and bitterly.

"The poor, brave, harmless, faithful fellow," she moaned. "Out of the malignity of my heart, in my pride and callousness, I sent him to an undeserved death! Oh, I am a wicked woman!"

Strangely enough Guntello's death seemed to divert her mind entirely from the idea of avenging herself on Almo. From hating him, she came to realize that she had really loved him all the while, that she loved him unalterably. From thinking that she desired his death she came to dread acutely that, exhausted in body by more than a hundred fights in ten months and worn by the strain of ceaseless anxiety and vigilance, Almo might succumb to even a chance-brought adversary.

In this new mood she confided in Lutorius.

The good man was horrified.

"And I never suspected anything wrong!" he exclaimed. "At least you have been outwardly collected. Nobody has suspected anything. But this is terrible. A Vestal should menace no man's life, should not desire any man's death. Far from it, her heart should be clean of hate, malice or envy."

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"Never mind what I have been," said Brinnaria. "No disasters have befallen Rome. There is no sign of any wrathfulness of the gods, or of their displeasure, and I am no longer as I was. That is all over, I am chastened. I desire harm to no one. Quite the reverse. What fills my mind now is the thought that, sooner or later, Almo must perish at the hand of some challenger. I long to save him. I would move earth and sea to save him. Must a King of the Grove live and die King of the Grove? Is there no way to rescue him?"

"Consult the Emperor," said Lutorius. "He is Chief Pontiff of Rome."

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CHAPTER XIX

COMFORT

COMMODUS received Brinnaria in the same palatial room in which she had so often conferred with his father. The majestic impression of the magnificent hall was, however, marred by the evidence of the young Emperor's chief interests. On one of the great chests lay a pair of boxing gloves, on another a quiver of arrows and two unstrung bows, on a third a bridle; a fourth was open and from it protruded a sheaf of those wooden swords which the Romans used for fencing-practice as we use foils. Commodus could never wholly free himself from his absorbing passion for athletic sports.

He himself was a sort of artistic caricature of his father, being very like him in height, build, features and complexion, with similarly abundant hair and beard falling over his shoulders and bosom in long ringlets. But in place of the gravity, wisdom, intelligence and sympathy which had ennobled the countenance of Aurelius, his face wore an expression of boyish frivolity, silly vanity, vapid stupidity and impatient selfishness.

Brinnaria had seen him countless times and often near at hand, not only close to her when both occupied their official seats in the Amphitheatre or the Circus, at horse-races or other shows, but almost at arm's length at various religious functions, processions, sacrifices and other acts of public worship. Necessarily

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they had often exchanged formal greetings, but never yet any other words.

He greeted her effusively, with a comical mixture of hobbledehoy clumsiness and imperial dignity.

"I'm glad you demanded an audience," he said, as she sat down; "we should have had a good talk long ago. You lambasted old Bambilio. That is one for you. A juicier story I never heard. You are made of pepper. And you saved the retiarius, the year after I was born. I've often gloated over the story and wished I had been there to see. I was there when you had your embarrassing experience and came through it so gallantly. I was proud of you, like everybody else. I remember it well. And Father gave me special instructions about you, so emphatically that even scatter-brained as I am I have not forgotten them. I've been meaning to have a talk with you ever since I took up this Emperor job. But you know how it is. Every day there are ready and waiting for me to do more things I really want to do than any one man could get through in any one day, and three-quarters of them I have to forego doing because of the pressure of my official duties. I can never seem to get time for half the sword-exercise and archery drill and driving practice I need, let alone for chats with heroines.

"I trust you'll accept my apologies.

"There! that is all the talking I mean to do. I'm going to listen, now. Tell me what you want and I'll see your desire accomplished. I'll do anything for you, not only for your heroism and on account of Father's directions, but because of your horse-breeding. They say you're as good a judge of a horse as any man in Italy and I believe there are not a dozen to equal you. I've driven several pairs of your crack colts and they

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are paragon racers, docile as lambs and mettlesome as game-cocks.

"There! I've gone on talking! But I am really going to stop now and listen. State your wishes."

"I'll have to make a long story of it," said Brinnaria, hesitatingly.

"And one sixty times better worth listening to than ninety-nine out of a hundred of the long stories folks bore me with, I'll wager," said Commodus. "If it is long we'll get to the end quicker by beginning at once. And take your time, I'll talk to you till dark, if need be. You are entitled to all of my time you choose to claim."

Brinnaria began at the beginning and rehearsed her story fully, Commodus listening without much fidgeting and interrupting only to say now and then:

"Yes, I know about that. I remember that."

When she came to Almo's escape from Britain the Emperor slapped his thigh and emitted a sound between a grunt and a squawk.

"The joke is on me!" he guffawed. "Just like me! Father told me particularly about his injunctions to Opstorius, and Pertinax himself reminded me about Almo after Father's death. But it all went out of my head and I never thought of it from the moment Pertinax bowed himself out until this very instant. I'll make up to you for my forgetfulness, I promise you. Go on."

Upon her telling of Almo's idling at inns after he ran away from Fregellæ, Commodus cut in with:

"I liked Almo, what little I saw of him, but I had forgotten him. You make me remember him, make me recall trifling things about him, attitudes, smiles, tones of his voice, witty replies, quips. I liked him. But I

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like him better than ever from what you tell me of him. I understand him. I know just how he feels. I long, sometimes, to chuck Emperorizing and go off alone, with no responsibilities, and have a really good time hobnobbing with the good fellows the world is full of. I envy him. I dream of doing it, but he cut loose and did it. Good for Almo."

At first mention of the King of the Grove Commodus leapt up from his throne, strode up and down the room and clapped his hands.

Two pages rushed in.

"Get out!" he shouted. "I wasn't clapping for you."

He paced the room like a caged tiger.

"Think of it!" he exclaimed. "Think of it! Your lad certainly has fire in his belly, yes and brains in his head, too! Think of it! He thought it all out up there in the raw all-day mists, thought it all out, and he works towards his purpose like a pattern diplomat, like a born general, like a Scipio, like a cat after a bird! Has himself sold as a slave, bides his time, puts himself in the pink of condition, watches his opportunity.

"Think of it! Disconsolate because he couldn't marry you, moody because he has to wait so long, he seeks comfort in challenging the King of the Grove. Oh, I love him! Only a prince of good fellows would have thought of it. No ordinary adventure would divert him. He picks out the most hazardous venture possible. Oh, I love him!"

When she narrated her interchange of clothing with Flexinna and her litter-journey, Commodus looked grave. The loutishness vanished from his attitude and expression. He became wholly an Emperor.

"Out of Rome, outside the walls, beyond the Pomœrium all night!" he exclaimed. "That sounds bad.

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You were fool-hardy, too reckless entirely. Why that is impiety. That amounts to sacrilege!"

As with Flexinna Brinnaria reminded him of the Vestals' flight after the disaster at the Allia and of their sojourn at Cære, again emphasizing the contrast between their unreprehended departure and the scrupulous steadfastness of the Flamen of Jupiter."

"You have me!" he acknowledged. "Your contentions are sound. But, all the same, even if it was merely a violation of rule, still, it is a mighty serious matter. It is a good thing for you that I like you, that my Father trusted you so notably, and gave me such explicit and emphatic injunctions about you, that you have made a clean breast of it all to me. If I had known nothing more about you than I know of Manlia or Gargilia, if I had learned of your escapade from any one but you, I'd have had you formally accused, tried, convicted and buried alive with the utmost despatch.

"As things are, after all Father had to say about you, after his detailing to me your several conversations with him, I understand, I sympathize, I am convinced of the innocence of your feeling for Almo, of the austerity with which you have banished from you all thoughts unbefitting a Vestal and have postponed your anticipations of marriage until your service shall have come to an end, I believe in the impeccable correctness of your attitude.

"But, without that, even having learnt of your prank from yourself, I should have thought it necessary to lay the facts before the College of Pontiffs and ask their opinion. It looks fishy, stravaging all over the landscape after dark with a cavalier beside your litter all night long. I comprehend, I condone, I judge that

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you have not impaired your qualifications for your high office. I have no qualms. But it is well for you that Father instructed me. Go on, tell me the rest."

Over the fight he rubbed his hands and chirruped with delight, and, when she spoke of the King's harem, he burst into roars of laughter, rolling himself on his throne, slapping his thighs, holding his ribs.

"Oh you women," he gurgled, "you are all alike, you Vestals as much as the rest! The fire of womanhood smoulders under your icy composure like the fires of Etna under her mantle of snow.

"You more than most Vestals, of course. You are a real human being, you are! So you went out to save him, even if you lost your life trying, even if you were buried alive for it, and you came back hot, red hot, to have him killed, and the sooner the better, it couldn't be too soon for you.

"Oh, I'm glad you came. I haven't been entertained like this since I was made Emperor. Go on!"

When she uttered the word Fagutal and told of her visit to the rookery he had another fit of laughter and exhausted himself with mirth.

When she narrated the repeated failures of the champions she had suborned and Almo's uniform success, Commodus was in ecstasy.

"He's the boy for my money," he cried. "He's worth all the trouble you've had with him. You'll get a husband worth waiting for. He's one in a million. One hundred and five bouts in ten months and victor in all of them! He's a jewel, a pearl! I'd do anything for you, as I told you, I'd keep myself on the rack day and night for you and him. You are a pair! There's not on earth the match for the two of you!"

At the end of her story he said:

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"You have not gone to all this trouble and taken up so much of my time and confided to me all the secrets of your heart merely to ease your mind. There's something you want me to do, some help you expect to gain from me. You have given me no inkling of what it is. What is it? Speak out!"

"He is certain to be killed sooner or later," she said, wringing her hands. "I want you to help me to save him."

"Save him!" Commodus echoed. "Isn't he competent to save himself? Hasn't he convinced you of his ability to protect himself—Sooner or later? Much later, very much later. And he's more likely to be killed by old age than by any weapon in the hands of any man.

"I'll never understand women. No man can, I suppose. You're bent, bound and resolved that he must die. You pour out gold like water to compass his death. You have Italy ransacked for dexterous cutthroats. He never turns a hair. It's easy for him as for a Molossian dog to kill wolves. He enjoys it; disposes of every man who dare face him. You can't find another bravo to take the risk, not for any money. Then, when he has proved himself the best fighter in Italy, you face about and all of a sudden you are in a wax for fear some one may kill him!

"Nobody will ever kill him. You and I saw him dispose of more than a dozen expert gladiators, one after the other; you saw how daintily and adroitly he did it. You have just described his fight with his predecessor. It was over almost before it was begun. The incumbent was a dead man from the moment he faced Almo. Both knew it, too, and, since then he has done for the pick of the blackguards from all Italy. If Ravax and his gang could find no one to face him, there

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is none; if no man of that crew could best him, not Ravax himself, no man can best him. Don't you see?"

"No, I don't," she said. "It will be just like his fights in the arena. No matter how often he wins, he is bound to lose at last."

"Don't you believe it," Commodus argued. "I remember him well. I was wild over him just after Father's triumph and saw a good deal of him before he set out for Britain. I was then no such all-round expert at weapon-play as I have become since, but I was good for my age. I fenced with him repeatedly and I know his quality. I had all the best swordsmen in the capital pitted against him and not one of them was his match.

"Murmex Lucro did not come to Rome till after Father's death. So I never saw Murmex and Almo fence. But let me tell you this: Murmex is the only man alive who can fence with me for points and make anything like my score. And Almo is the only man alive, except me, who is fit to face Murmex on equal terms. There are only two men on earth who could kill Almo in a fight with any kind of weapons—Murmex is one and I am the other.

"Why, Almo is as safe in the Grove as I am in the Palace. Don't you worry about him. Nobody will kill him; take it from me, I know."

Brinnaria, with a sharp intake of her breath, gazed about the room and collected herself to resume her argument and make her next point.

"Do you concede," she queried, "that I have the right to be solicitous about Almo's life?"

"Father said so," Commodus replied, "and I never knew him to be wrong. I took that opinion from him and I see no reason to change it."

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"Do you concede," she pressed him, "that I have the right to looking forward to marrying him at the end of my service?"

"Like Father, I do," he admitted.

"How can I ever marry him," she demanded, "if he remains King of the Grove?"

The young Emperor laughed merrily.

"Don't you worry about that, either," he said. "I told you I'd do anything for you and I meant it. I told you I'd do anything for Almo, and I meant that too. But, as things are, doing what you want and what is good for him will be doing just what I most want myself. I have a frightfully poor memory. Barely seven years ago my Father triumphed after what was thought a complete, decisive and crushing victory over Avidius Cassius and a huge confederation of nomadic tribes. Cassius was certainly abolished; he was buried. But after scarcely five years the desert nomads were as active as ever and they have grown so pertinacious and cocky that something must be done. I don't want to go myself, and I feel no confidence in my ability to accomplish anything if I went. I have been on the rack to decide whom to send. I can't afford to send some bungler who'd mismanage and let the sand-hills devour a half a dozen of my best legions. My councillors and I have found no promising candidate. All the while I have been cudgelling my brains trying to remember something Father told me. I distinctly recalled that he said that he had in view the very paragon of a commander to dispatch against Avidius, but that some occurrence made it impossible to send him and he had to go himself. I couldn't for the life of me recollect what had happened to hinder the man going or what the man's name was. Since it

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was a verbal communication from Father I had no memorandum and no one else had ever known it.

"Now I remember that Almo was the man and that his infatuation with the life of a gladiator was what prevented.

"Do you see what I mean? I shall not have to go to Syria and I'll send the very best man for that job who can be found on earth. If anybody knows what I'm doing they'll say that Almo is a lunatic and I am another to send him. But nobody will ever know and if everybody knows, what do I care. Father knew a good man when he saw one. I'll take his word for it that Almo proved himself the greatest genius for desert fighting that the Republic has produced in a hundred years. And I'll follow my own intuition that a swashbuckler whose own thoughts prompted him to challenge the King of the Grove as a cure for tedium, who had the nerve to carry out the idea and the skill to win a hundred and six fights in ten months must be a good all-round man and a real man clear through. I take it that being put in supreme command of a great expedition will brush the cobwebs from Almo's brain and restore him to himself. Do you follow my idea?"

"I cannot conjecture," Brinnaria replied, "how you expect to carry it out."

"Simple enough," said Commodus. "I'm not the man my Father was, not by a great deal. I am a natural all-round athlete, but I was never born to be an Emperor. All the same, when I buckle down to my job, I'm not such a bad hand at it. If I have a talk with Almo I'll swing him my way without half trying."

"But," Brinnaria interposed, "even you, even as Emperor and Chief Pontiff, cannot free a man who has become King of the Grove. There is no record of any

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form of exauguration for a Priest of Diana of the Underworld. There would be an outcry. Once King of the Grove a man must live out his life as King of the Grove."

Commodus grinned a school-boy grin.

"My dear," he said, "there are more ways of killing a dog besides choking him to death on fresh curds."

Brinnaria stared.

"You talk," he said, "as if you had gone over all the records. Don't you recall two cases where a King of the Grove died without being killed?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Well," he continued, "what was done?"

"Two challengers were brought forward," she said, "and they fought each other."

"Just so," said he, "and don't you recall one case where a King of the Grove disappeared and was believed to have run away, but was never found, nor any trace of him?"

"I remember that, too," she agreed.

"Well," he pressed her, "what was done in that case?"

"Two challengers fought each other that time also," she allowed.

"Well," he summed up, "that's what we'll have done now. Almo will vanish. He's good at it, he's had practice. Two challengers can be found easily enough."

"But," she cavilled, wide-eyed, "there's all the difference in the world between egging on two challengers after the post is vacant and arranging to vacate the post. What you propose would be sacrilege, impiety."

"Don't you worry about that!" he soothed her. "The priesthood at Aricia is no part of our hierarchy; the

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safety of Rome in no way depends on its sanctity. It is important enough for the nine towns that share the cult, but it concerns no others. It's an alien cult, anyhow. Whether Orestes brought it to Aricia or Hippolytus or who else makes no difference, nor the tradition that it is four hundred years older than Rome. It's a disgrace to Italy and it exists on sufferance. Father told me that Grandfather and he were both in half a mind to have it suppressed as the Bacchanals were suppressed. The curative repute of the Grove stood in the way. As for me, if it were not for the sporting character of the King's tenure, I'd see to it that Almo would be the last King. I feel free to do as I please in any matter that concerns it."

Brinnaria said nothing. He resumed:

"Leave it all to me. I'll go to Aricia myself; I'll expostulate with Almo; I'll appeal to his manhood, to his pride, to his patriotism. Ten to one he's disillusioned by this time, sick of his job and ready to listen to reason. He'll promise to obey me and he'll obey me.

"The rest will be managed by men who will make no mistakes. They'll find two challengers each much like Almo in build and appearance. One dark night Almo will slip off in charge of the men I delegate for that duty; the two challengers will be guided so that each thinks he is fighting the King of the Grove. Whichever survives will be rigged up in the customary toggery. There will be a corpse properly offered on the altar. Nobody will suspect anything."

About a month later Lutorius conveyed to her a hint from the Emperor. She at once applied for an audience.

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Commodus was as expansive as a boy who has had a good day's fishing.

"It's all over," he said, "and everything went off just as I foresaw and planned. Almo was disgusted and tractable. We found two desperadoes of suitable make. While we steered them at each other Almo slipped out. Besides you, your two friends, your agents, Lutorius and myself, no one knows that Almo was ever King of the Grove. I had him brought to the Palace and Lucro and I had no end of good fun fencing with him. I had the Senate pass a decree relieving him of all and sundry legal consequences of having been sold as a slave in Britain. I had him choose a full staff of the best possible aides, orderlies and such. He is off to Syria. I did not send for you until I had word that he had not only sailed from Brundisium but had actually landed at Dyrrhachium. I anticipate that the job I have sent him on will take all of six years. Just about when your service is drawing to an end he will return to Rome covered with glory and loaded with loot. The nomads have been plundering our cities and have accumulated in their strongholds immense amounts of treasure. He'll get it back. Meantime your mind should be at peace."

Brinnaria was properly grateful and expressed her feelings fervently.

"And now," said Commodus, "since I have done what you wanted and you are pleased, may I ask a favor of you? You can do something for me that no one else can and if you promise it will set my mind at rest to some extent."

Brinnaria earnestly promised to do her best.

"I am troubled," said the Emperor, "very much troubled. You know how rumors get about among

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people, starting no one knows where; and how, when such a notion is abroad, nothing on earth can counteract it.

"Well there's a story going about of an oracle, an oracle which says that the Republic reached its acme under Trajan, that the Empire kept up its prosperity under Hadrian and my Grandfather and Father, but that the glory of Rome is fated to fade and wane and that its decline will date from my taking over the Principiate.

"I am worried about it. I have sent to Delphi and Dodona and every other oracle from Olisipo to Pattala, but I can find no record of any such oracle having been uttered. The people, however, credit it as if it came from Delphi.

"I've had a hundred oracles consulted about the matter, Delphi too. They all hedge; not one is clear. But they all speak of an impending disaster that may be averted by watchfulness. And they all hint darkly at some danger to the Palladium; they all mention it somehow; most of them allude unmistakably to the Temple of Vesta; some of them manifestly refer to the Atrium; all of them speak of fire.

"Now I know that the sacred fire will be cared for by you and Manlia and Gargilia and Numisia as well as ever it was since Numa. Causidiena is too old to count and Terentia is too young, but in the four of you I have complete confidence as far as the fire is concerned.

"About the Palladium I don't feel so sure. The six terra-cotta chests are so exactly alike and the five counterfeits are so like the real statue that I am afraid the precautions taken to baffle an intruding thief might confuse you Vestals in a crisis.

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"Do you know the real Palladium from the five dummies?"

"I do," said Brinnaria; "we all do. When I had been a Vestal five years Causidiena showed me the Palladium. No Vestal is ever shown it until she is over fifteen. Like all other young Vestals I was made to spend hours in the inner storeroom, blindfolded, learning to recognize the real Palladium by touch.

"The differences between the original and the copies are very small, mostly in the carving of the folds of the gown. But every young Vestal is drilled until she can recognize the genuine relic by touch, one hundred times out of one hundred times, and until she can similarly discriminate the terra-cotta chest that contains it from the other five chests. I could tell the Palladium from the imitations instantly any time."

"You relieve me," said Commodus. "I've wanted to talk about this to all you Vestals, but I've been ashamed to broach the subject. Since you confided in me I feel no hesitation about confiding in you."

"I promise you," said Brinnaria, "that the Palladium will never be stolen, lost, or come to any harm if I can prevent it, and I believe I can. I pledge you my word."

"I feel better," said Commodus.

"And I want to say," Brinnaria added, "that I have always felt a special interest in the Palladium. Ever since I was old enough to share all the duties and all the responsibilities of a Vestal, my feelings have been particularly engaged with the Palladium. There is something tremendous and crushing in the thought of being in charge of four of the seven objects on the safety of which depends the safety of Rome and the prosperity of the Republic. Whenever Causidiena has

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shown them to us younger Vestals I have felt the strongest emotions at the sight of the jar containing the ashes of Orestes, of the antique gold canister which protects the plain, gold-mounted ivory sceptre of Priam, of the lapis-lazuli casket which enshrines the tatters remaining of Ilione's veil; but more than at sight of them I have trembled with awe to look at that little statuette, no longer than my forearm, and to think that if it were destroyed the Empire would crumble and Rome would perish. You may be sure I shall do all I can to keep safe the precious treasure committed to my charge."

"I feel sure you will," said Commodus.

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BOOK IV

THE REVULSION OF DELIGHT

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CHAPTER XX

ACCUSATION

AFTER Almo's redemption and his departure for Syria Brinnaria calmed down. Her feverish activity abated and vanished. She ceased to take any interest in the speed of her litter-bearers or of her carriage-teams. She took her outings for their own sake, not merely to feel herself transported rapidly from somewhere to anywhere. She kept an oversight of her stock-farms, but she left the management of them almost entirely to her bailiffs. On music she spent more of her time and in it she took an intenser delight.

Life in the Atrium altered chiefly through the growing up of Terentia, whose fifteenth birthday was celebrated soon after Almo left Italy, and by the steady waning of Causidiena's eyesight. She could still recognize familiar persons when between her and the strong light of a door or window in the daytime; she could still place pieces of wood on the fire, if it was burning well. But she was plainly verging on total blindness. Except in so far as it was modified by pride in Terentia and solicitude for Causidiena, life in the Atrium flowed on as it had for centuries.

Reports from Almo were uniformly good. From the first he displayed all the qualifications requisite for a commander in chief. For him everything promised well.

Under these conditions Brinnaria throve. Her natural vigor had always been such that she never had

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showed any outward signs of the strain to which she had been subjected. Uniformly she had looked handsome and healthy. But now, if anything, she looked healthier and handsomer than ever. She was then thirty-two years old. At ten years of age she had looked eighteen, at eighteen she had looked twenty-four. At thirty-two she still looked no more than twenty-five. Her hair was abundant and glossy, her eyes bright, her cheeks rosy; she was neither slender nor plump, but a well-muscled, graceful woman, decidedly young-looking, and altogether statuesque in build and carriage, but very much alive in her springy suppleness.

About a year after Almo's departure for Syria Lutorius came to see her one morning, his face grave. He indicated that they had best confer alone. In her tiny sanctum he came straight to the point.

"Daughter," he said, "my news is as bad as possible. You are formally accused of the worst misconduct."

"Why look so gloomy?" said Brinnaria. "That is comic, not tragic. Who's the fool accuser?"

"Calvaster, as you might conjecture," he answered, "and I grieve to have to inform you," he added, "that this is no laughing matter."

"Pooh!" said Brinnaria. "I'm not a bit afraid of Calvaster. Aurelius gave Commodus emphatic injunctions about me. And he went into details. Commodus can't have forgotten his reprimand to Calvaster nor his categorical threat."

"I fear," said Lutorius, "that his father's instructions on that particular point are not well to the front of the Emperor's mind."

"Well, anyhow," said Brinnaria, "everybody knows my preoccupation with Almo and everybody saw my

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behavior in the Amphitheatre. I feel pretty safe in respect to my general reputation. As to particulars, I've been vigilantly careful to keep away from Almo. Except twice, in the presence of Aurelius, I haven't been within speaking distance of him in twenty-two years. Between the fact that no one can prove that I have had anything to do with him and the improbability that any one would suspect me of interest in any other man, let alone misconduct with any other man, I feel entirely secure."

Lutorius wagged his head.

"You are accused of misconduct with another man," he said.

"Absurd!" said Brinnaria, "easy to confute. Who is the man?"

"Not so easy to confute, I fear," said Lutorius. "The man named is Quintus Istorius Vocco."

"Whew!" cried Brinnaria, springing to her feet and snapping her fingers. "That is ingenious! That will give me trouble! I didn't credit Calvaster with that much sense. I never thought of any one looking askance at my relations with Quintus. I've never taken any precautions as to when I was with him or how long or where. I've treated him as an honorary brother, seeing I have no brothers of my own left alive. Flexinna has been such a sister to me, that we have disregarded Quintus almost as if he were a slave or a statue or a picture on the wall or another woman. Whew!"

"You perceive," said Lutorius, "that the situation, in general, is very serious?"

"I do, indeed!" admitted Brinnaria.

"Serious as it is in general," he went on, "it is still more serious in particular. Your excursion to Aricia was by no means as much a secret as you have all along

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supposed. I, for instance, knew of it before you confessed it to me."

"How was that?" Brinnaria inquired.

"Numisia," he explained, "saw you go out in Flexinna's clothes and recognized you. She entered your room and talked with Flexinna. She summoned me and we conferred. We both loved you and we both believed in you. We were solicitous for the cult, but we were nearly as much solicitous for you. We agreed that we were almost fully warranted in assuming your entire innocence of heart and that your impulsive behavior would not alienate the good will of the Goddess. We decided to take it upon ourselves to judge you blameless and to shield you. Utta was instructed never to let you know that Numisia had seen Flexinna; Flexinna, of course, fell in with our plans. Numisia made every arrangement that would prevent any more from learning the secret and would make your return easy.

"After you came back safe our decision seemed justified. I talked with Vocco and learned that nothing had occurred to render your exposure likely, except your encounter with Calvaster. As we heard nothing from Calvaster we felt entirely successful. It turns out that he was only biding his time. He has formally accused you before the College of Pontiffs, alleging in general your long-continued familiarity with Vocco, and, in particular, your having been outside of Rome after midnight in Vocco's company."

"Whew," Brinnaria exclaimed, "this is indeed serious! I feel myself strangling or starving in a vaulted cell. What am I to do?"

"See Commodus first of all," said Lutorius.

In the short interval since her former audience, those traits of which he had previously shown the merest

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traces had rapidly developed in Commodus into fixed characteristics. He had become what he remained until his end, an odd mingling of loutish, peevish school-boy, easy-going, self-indulgent athlete and superstitious, suspicious despot.

"To begin with," he said, "I want you to understand that I like you, that I haven't forgotten that you rescued the retiarius, whopped Bambilio and behaved like a trump when Father tested you. I'm for you. Your colts are the cream of Italian stud-farms. You are a wonderful woman, all round. But, as a Vestal, you have your weak points. I remember Father's instructions about you and I have all that in mind. Besides, I know that I, as Chief Pontiff, have the right to make my own decision about any such matter and to brush aside anybody else's opinion and anybody else's interpretation of the evidence. Also my impulse is to make use of my prerogative, dismiss the accusation against you, reiterate Father's warning to Calvaster and get the whole thing off my mind. I don't like Calvaster and I don't value him an atom. They say he's indispensable, but if he irritates me ever so little more I'll dispense with him and I'll wager the Republic will get on without him. You see that I am strong on your side and almost on the point of deciding in your favor.

"But I hesitate. This case of yours worries me more than anything that has come up since I took over the Principiate. I cannot make up my mind.

"I'm not the man I was a year ago. I'm shaken. Father told me that the most wearing feature of his being Emperor was his recurring escapes from assassination. I had my first escape just after your audience with me. It jarred me horribly. The fool barely missed finishing me. The experience made me take pre-

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cautions and so no other miscreant has come so near to doing for me. But the repetitions have grown monotonous. I always thought highly of your lad, and I've often wondered how he managed to get any sleep or swallow any food while he was King of the Grove, but I think immeasurably more of him since I've been through something faintly similar. He deserves the best of life and I hope he'll get his heart's desire and marry you at the end of your service.

"You see how enthusiastically I am on your side.

"But there is much to be considered.

"If this were a question of judging a two-year-old filly I'd need no man's advice and I'd listen to no man's opinion. I'm better fitted to judge a horse than any man alive. It would be the same if it were a question of refereeing a sword-bout or a boxing-mill or a wrestling-match or anything of the kind. I know all about such things and I know that I am a judge superior to anybody on earth. I'm a born all-round athlete and everybody knows it and recognizes me as a past master.

"But as an Emperor, as Chief Pontiff, such is not at all the case. I feel a fumbler, a bungler. I grope. I suspect that the judgment of my advisers is better than mine. What is worse, I know that they think so. I am surrounded by men pre-eminent in their specialties, who look on me as a green boy placed by mere chance in a position which I fail to fill adequately. They watch me like hawks, they expect to see me blunder, they raise eyebrows at each other, they exchange glances. It rattles me. I wish I had Alexander's nerve. He was as young as I am and he brooked no opposition, but rammed his opinions down his councillors' throats from the hour when he became King. But I haven't his nerve, not by a long shot. I had as good teachers

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as he had, too. But, Hercules be good to me, I never could learn anything out of a book.

"As a charioteer, or a swordsman I'm as confident as a lion. As an Emperor I'm as cowardly as a jackal. It's the effect of the prophecies and auguries and oracles and such. They all hint at my impairing the prosperity of the Republic or diminishing the power of the Empire. It gallies me when I see two old bald heads wink at each other; I know they are thinking:

" 'What did I tell you! Here's this young fool ruining Rome, just as the oracle prophesies.'

"It gets on my nerves.

"I daren't decide the matter on my own judgment.

"Besides, there's the danger of assassination hanging over me. All the men who have tried so far have been highly educated magnates of lofty principles. They seem to feel I am an unworthy Prince and that to kill me would be a service to the state. It galls me to think of it, and me doing my best for the Republic and the Empire, denying myself hours of pleasure daily, missing races and all kinds of contests and toiling over documents and estimates and statistics. But it is true. If I decide this case of yours, ten to one any number of self-righteous nobles will say to themselves:

" 'Here is this lout on the way to destroy the foundations of Rome's greatness. Rome must be saved from him. My duty is clear. He must be put out of the way.'

"Nice situation for me. I dare not let loose any such possible fanaticism for my own destruction.

"And apart from any qualms about my qualifications to judge, apart from any dread of the consequences to myself, of absolving you, there is my sense of duty to Rome. Here are these cursed ambiguous oracles

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hinting some harm to Rome, mentioning fire and the Temple of Vesta and the Palladium. Perhaps what they mean is just the possible wrath of Vesta at an unworthy priestess. How can I tell?

"You see why I hesitate?"

Brinnaria nodded. She judged it no time to speak, and, had she wished to speak she could hardly have done so.

"I might not have hesitated," Commodus resumed, "if Calvaster had come to me. But he pops up in a full meeting of the College of Pontiffs and says he saw you, after midnight and before dawn, on the Appian Road, between Aricia and Bovillæ, in a litter that didn't belong to you and with Vocco on horseback beside it. That puts all the Pontiffs in possession of the facts and on the watch to see how I'll decide, if I do decide. Calvaster made sure of proving those facts, for he had two highly respectable and respected nobles to swear that they were with him and saw Vocco and the litter and knew the litter for Nemestronia's. That he had any number of witnesses to swear to the frequency of your visits to Vocco's house, your habit of dining there and the freedom with which you treated him.

"My impulse was to tell Calvaster I disbelieved any story he fathered, that I had my Father's instructions discrediting him, that I knew all about your intimacy with Flexinna and her husband, that I knew all about your excursion to Aricia and why you went and that I approved and that was the end of it. I have told you why I hesitated.

"But I was inclined that way. I have talked with Lutorius and Causidiena and Numisia. They feel towards you as my Father felt. They believe in you and in your worthiness as a priestess, and they mini-

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mize your irregularities. I sent for Flexinna and talked with her. She deserves consideration, if only because she is the mother of the largest family to be found among our nobility, even among our gentry. She hoots at the idea of anything improper between you and Vocco, in act or thought. She evidently tells the truth. It is plain that she and Vocco are a devoted pair, that you and he never did anything wrong or thought of anything wrong. I sent for Vocco and talked with him. I am all but clear what I should do, but I am not quite clear.

"Now, there are only two ways to settle this: one is for me to settle it myself and out of hand. The other is to have a formal trial of you before the College of Pontiffs.

"If you are tried you'll be condemned. All you can say of the innocence of your intimacy with Vocco, all you can say of the innocence of your regard for Almo, all I can say of my Father's high esteem of you, of his injunctions regarding you, will not avail to save you. The Pontiffs will not heed the considerations which were so plain to Father and are so plain to me and Lutorius and Numisia. They will say it makes no difference whether you went to Aricia because of solicitude for Almo or on account of an intrigue with Vocco. They will hold that such a manifestation of interest in Almo proves you almost as unfit to oe a Vestal as if it were certain that you were philandering with Vocco.

"In particular they will hold that there might be room to absolve you had you openly gone to save Almo in your full regalia and in your own carriage, or your own litter, with your lictor before you; but that while the fact of your being out of Rome all night in a litter is damning enough, the appearance of duplicity and

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underhanded secrecy given to the proceeding by your being disguised in another woman's clothing and carried in a borrowed litter makes terribly against you.

"Of course I could impose my will on the Pontiffs, but I should hesitate to override their decision, even more than I hesitate to decide the case myself, and for the reasons I have given.

"Yet I must say I could forget my dread of assassination and ignore any opinionated contempt I might evoke, if I could be sure in my own heart that I am doing what is best for Rome; I should be as arrogant an Emperor as ever Domitian was if only I felt confident that my instincts are right. My instincts all urge me to act as an Emperor and a Pontifex Maximus and settle this matter out of hand, once and for all.

"But I hesitate. I can't make up my mind. All I need is a sign that you are as acceptable to Vesta as I believe you are. I have tried to satisfy myself, to elicit some sign of the Goddess' will, but no sign has been vouchsafed me. I've had the Sibylline Books consulted, which is a trying matter with Calvaster left out of the consulting board; I have sent to every oracle within reach, have put questions to all the sibyls in all the caves of Italy, have called in a rabble of Etruscan soothsayers, every haruspex and auspex in Etruria, I believe. They all hedge. They are all vague. They are all indefinite. They give me no help!

"Now, I like you; I like Almo; I like both of you and I respect you; I believe in you. I'd hate to wake up and call for any breakfast I had a whim for and look at it and smell it and think of you, all alone in the dark in a vaulted cell six foot under the rubbish of that garbage-dump out by the Colline Gate. And I hate the thought of the bother and worry of a trial.

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I want to put my foot down and assert my will and be done with it all. But, as I've said a dozen times already, I hesitate. Chiefly I hesitate because I am resolute to do my duty to Rome according to my lights. I feel I am right, but I am not quite man enough to follow my feelings. If I could have some plain sign that Vesta understands and condones your past irregularities as I do, that Vesta approves of you and is pleased with you as I am, if I could feel Vesta corroborating my feelings, if I could evoke an unmistakable token of her will, I'd not hesitate. I'd scout the suggestion of a trial; I'd squelch Calvaster; I'd absolve you."

Brinnaria looked straight into his goggling, bloodshot eyes.

"Would you consider it an unmistakable sign," she said, "a plain token of my acceptability to my Goddess, of her esteem for me, if Vesta gave me power to carry water in a sieve?"

Commodus goggled his eyes at her even more than habitually.

"Carry water in a sieve," he cried, "as Tuccia did?"

"There is a legend," said Brinnaria sedately, "that some Vestal once proved her holiness by carrying water in a sieve. And the story is connected with Tuccia in popular tradition. But if it was ever done some other Vestal did it. Poor Tuccia was innocent, as far as I can judge from the minutes of her trial. But she was not absolved, by intervention of Vesta or of her judges. She was condemned and buried. You can read the verdict as well as the details of the proceedings in the records. And what is left of poor Tuccia is now in one of those tiny vaulted cells under the Wicked Field. You will find, along with the documents of her case, the bill for the wages of the mason who completed the

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vault after she had descended the ladder and the affidavits of the sentinels who patrolled the spot day and night for a month, according to custom.

"Never mind who did it or didn't do it, or whether it ever was done at all before," said Commodus, "if I saw you carry water in a sieve I'd hold it a plain sign of Vesta's particular favor to you, of your special acceptability to her, of the correctness of my intuitions about you and about this whole wretched business.

"Do I understand you to offer to demonstrate your innocence by carrying water in a sieve?"

"That is my offer!" said Brinnaria.

"But," he protested, "the thing can't be done. It's impossible! Better stand your chance of a trial."

"I am sure," said Brinnaria, "that my Goddess will not desert me. I know I am innocent and acceptable to her. She knows me and will give me the power to prove my worthiness. She will not fail me. I know I can do it."

"Do I understand you to offer to do it in broad daylight before me and the whole College of Pontiffs, Calvaster and all?"

"In sight of all Rome," said Brinnaria, "if all Rome could crowd near enough to see."

"Do I understand you," said the Emperor, "to stake your life on the venture, and, just as you would expect full absolution if you succeed, so to expect a rigid and severely stern trial before me and the College of Pontiffs, with your failure counting against you, if you fail in the attempt?"

"That is my understanding," said Brinnaria, unflinching, her clear eyes on his face, her cheeks neither flushed nor blanched, her expression calm, her pose easy, her voice unfaltering.

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"Hercules be good to me!" cried Commodus. "That is a first class game sporting offer! I like you, girl! I like the idea. I see my way to a decision. I glimpse a method of banishing my hesitation. I'll take you. If you agree, clasp hands, like a man."

Brinnaria stood up and put out her hand.

"For life or death," said the Emperor.

They clasped hands.

"Done!" said Commodus.

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CHAPTER XXI

ORDEAL

THE next day Commodus, officially, in his full regalia as Emperor and Pontifex Maximus, convoyed by a magnificent retinue of gorgeously apparelled gentlemen-in-waiting, equerries, aides, orderlies and pages, and of gaudily uniformed guards, paid a formal visit to the Atrium.

He was received by Lutorius, Causidiena and Numisia, who had been in close conference most of the previous afternoon and until late at night and again most of the morning from dawn. Causidiena, on account of her failing sight, was escorted by Manlia and Gargilia.

After the exchange of ceremonious greetings Commodus asked:

"Where is Brinnaria? Why isn't she here?"

"We thought best," Causidiena replied, "that she should not be present at our conference."

"As to part of it I quite agree," said the Emperor. "Fairness to her requires that much of what we have to say should be said in her absence, as she must be free from any suspicion of participation in some of our arrangements. But part of what we have to say she must hear and some details I must talk over with her. Send for her, and meanwhile, sit down, all of you, sit down, I say."

Manlia and Gargilia departed to summon Brinnaria.

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When she came and had seated herself the Emperor said:

"I've been thinking over this matter ever since you left me. Precious little else did I do yesterday and mighty little sleep did I get last night. I'm not clear yet altogether, but I see daylight on several points.

"What you propose is more or less like interpreting the significance of the appearances seen in the victim's intestines after a sacrifice for a specific object; it amounts to asking a definite question of your Goddess and getting a yes or no answer.

"That is one way to regard it and seems to me correct from the religious point of view.

"But there is another point of view and another way to regard it, not less correct, it seems to me.

"This is a sort of a sporting proposal, like a dicing-contest, or any kind of match or wager.

"Now in such matters, it is important, it is of the utmost importance, that there should be no differences of opinion between the principals or among the backers or lookers-on after the contest or during its progress; particularly that no unexpected differences of opinion should crop up after starting the set of actions which determine the decision. To avoid all such untoward possibilities, every detail must be settled in advance before the matter comes to a test.

"Now, treating your appeal to Vesta not only as a solemn invocation of the Goddess, but also as a sporting chance, I intend to have a definite, unquestionable understanding beforehand on every debatable point.

"You see what I mean?

"Some of the points we others will settle without you, but we shall begin with those which you must settle or share in settling.

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"I and Lutorius, Causidiena and Numisia are to be the witnesses to the stipulations and our agreement on any point is to prove that point. I propose to make it impossible for there to be any misunderstanding or disagreement among the four of us, to make it certain that we four think, speak and act unanimously on all points whatever. Nothing must be assumed, everything must be explicit.

"To begin with, is this a fair statement of your proposal?

"You maintain that you are a worthy priestess of Vesta and wholly acceptable to her. You propose to demonstrate this by asking of her the power to carry water in a sieve in the sight of the whole College of Pontiffs and of such other persons as I may see fit to have present at the test. If you fail you will expect to be tried for misconduct. If you succeed you will expect to be then and there absolved from all accusations and imputations connected with your deportment or behavior.

"Is that a fair statement of your proposal?"

"It is," Brinnaria replied.

"What kind of water do you propose to carry?" Commodus asked. "Spring water, rain-water from a tank, aqueduct-water, or what?"

"I assumed," said Brinnaria, "that I would carry water from the river, in accordance with the legend of my predecessor: Father Tiber being himself one of our gods, one of the sternest to evildoers, yet to the righteous most kindly and helpful."

"Excellent!" said the Emperor. "My notion precisely. That is settled. I accordingly appoint as the place of your test the Marble Quay, since the porticoes flanking it shut out the mob and protect the Quay from

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intruding eyes, and since the space enclosed by them is ample for the assemblage of the College of Pontiffs, the Senate and the Court officials. Are you satisfied with that place?"

"I am," said Brinnaria.

"In what kind of a sieve do you propose to carry water?" came the next question.

"A sieve," said Brinnaria, "is a sieve."

"Not at all," Commodus objected. "There are sieves and sieves."

"Well, of course," Brinnaria reflected, "I do not mean a broken, worn-out or imperfect sieve, nor one incompetently made."

"Just so," the Emperor amplified. "You propose to carry water in a sieve with a circular rim, without any hole, crevice or crack in it and with a web stretched taut on the rim, evenly woven and of the finest mesh."

"That expresses my unformed idea," said Brinnaria.

"Did you mean a linen sieve," the Emperor asked, "or a horse-hair sieve, or a metal sieve?"

"That," said Brinnaria, "can make no difference, if it fulfills the conditions you have just specified. I leave the choice of material to you."

"That is the correct attitude for you," said Commodus, "and does you credit.

"And now I think we four will settle the other details without you. Do you agree to that?"

"No!" Brinnaria objected. "I think I should be a party to the settling of several other details."

"What are they?" Commodus queried.

"In the first place," said Brinnaria, "there should be the clearest understanding as to how much water I must carry."

"What do you mean?" the Emperor asked.

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"Well," Brinnaria expounded, "a drop of water the size of my thumb-nail would not be enough, I presume. That would not be considered as demonstrating my innocence. You would expect me to carry more water than that. On the other hand, to exact that I carry a sieve full of water to the top of the rim, as if it were a pan, would be unfair to me."

"I see," said Commodus. "I should lay down the condition that the water must cover the web of the sieve entirely and touch the rim all round, and that it should be a finger-breadth deep. Deeper than that it need not be, that depth would prove the favor of your Goddess as plainly as if you carried all Tiber. Is that all? If not, what next?"

"Next," she said, "it ought to be definitely agreed how far I must carry the sieve with the water in it."

"You do not need to carry it at all," said Commodus. "If you stand up and hold the sieve of water as high as your chin, you will have proved the favor of your Goddess for you."

Lutorius, tactful and bland, here spoke up.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I doubt whether that will confute Brinnaria's enemies or even convince the majority of the Pontiffs."

"What does it signify?" the Emperor demanded, "whether anybody else is convinced, if I am satisfied?"

"Nothing whatever, your Majesty," said Lutorius, "if you take that view of the matter."

"Perhaps," Commodus admitted, "there may be something in your suggestion. Suppose we make the stipulation that she must carry the sieve of water from the brink of the river to the top of the steps."

"The number of steps," Lutorius reminded him, "varies at different points along the Marble Quay."

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"True," the Emperor admitted. "Let us specify the middle stair, which has seven steps, if I mistake not. Do you agree to that?" he asked Brinnaria.

"I agree," she concluded.

After Brinnaria had gone, Commodus resumed:

"Now we must decide," he said, "what kind of a sieve she is to use."

Causidiena spoke up, her all but sightless eyes strained towards the Emperor.

"Lutorius and Numisia and I have talked over that question," she said. "It seems to me that it would be unfair to her for us to decide on a metal sieve. They are always coarse and the apertures between the wires are comparatively large. It seems to us that no one could carry water in a copper sieve, not even by a miracle.

"The meshes of linen sieves are the smallest of any made, but the linen does not seem to have much sustaining power. We feel that with a linen sieve not only Brinnaria would be, as Lutorius expressed it, severely handicapped for water-carrying, but that, as he also said, I fear irreverently, that Vesta herself would be too much handicapped in respect to miracle-working."

"A mighty sensible remark," Commodus cut in, "and one with which I concur. You are more of a sport than I thought you, Lutorius."

"Considering only the construction of sieves," Causidiena continued, "we were of the opinion that a horse-hair sieve would be the fairest. The hairs are coarser than linen threads and finer than copper wires and the apertures between are similarly of medium size, as sieves go.

"Besides, we have ascertained that horse-hair sieves are by far the most usual kind. We are told that in

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most sieve-shops in Rome all the linen sieves and copper sieves sold do not amount to one-third the horse-hair sieves."

"That ought to settle that point," said Commodus.

"No one can cavil if we use the commonest kind of sieve, of medium fineness and of normal make."

"As to the question of procuring one we must arrange that Brinnaria may feel wholly secure that it has not been tampered with by some enemy of hers, and, on the other hand, that all persons whatever, to whomsoever hostile or friendly, or wholly indifferent, may be at once and forever certain that neither Brinnaria nor any partisan of hers has had any access to it before the test. Have you any suggestions to make?"

"Yes," Causidiena replied. "Lutorius and Numisia and I have debated that point and have come to a conclusion which we think you might approve. The best sieve-maker in Rome is Caius Truttidius Falcifer, a tenant of one of our shops on the Holy Street. Not only are his wares reputed the best-made sieves produced in Rome, but he sells more than any one else and carries a larger stock than can be found in the possession of any other dealer. He is sieve-maker to the Atrium, like his father before him. His horse-hair sieves are the closest and finest of their kind. We use them to sift the flour for our ceremonial cakes. I had some brought to show you. Where are they, Numisia?"

Numisia rose and took from an onyx console a flattish dish-like basket of gilt wicker, containing a number of square cakes. In size and on account of the ridges on them, each looked much like the joined four fingers of a man's hand.

Commodus took one, broke it and munched a piece.

"Very good," he said. "If the excellence of the

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pastry demonstrates the virtue of the sieve let us consider it proved. I do not see, however, what the cakes have to do with it. But I am entirely willing to agree that Brinnaria is to use a horse-hair sieve made by Truttidius.

"Now, how are we to select the particular sieve so as to convince all concerned that it is a normal sieve chosen at random and not one doctored for the occasion?"

"Our idea," said Lutorius, "was to arrange that Truttidius be present with a number of horse-hair sieves, practically with his whole stock of his best, and that one of those be chosen before the whole College of Pontiffs, perhaps by your Majesty, perhaps by some one of the altar-boys, blindfolded, if you like that idea, or in any other manner which seems good to you."

"That," said the Emperor, "is an excellent suggestion. But would not there be some difficulty in carrying to the Marble Quay so large a number of sieves at once, particularly just when it will be crowded with notables and the neighboring squares and streets choked, even jammed, with their equipages? We should not want present a numerous gang of sieve-carrying slaves. But if more than two sieves are trusted to each slave, there will be danger of the sieves being damaged in transit. We might find it difficult to select one sufficiently perfect."

"We have thought of that," said Lutorius, "and have devised a solution which we think you might accept. I have arranged to have Truttidius convey some eighty horse-hair sieves to the water-front of the Marble Quay in a flat-bottomed row-boat, such as are used for bringing vegetables to the quays of the Forum Olitorium. The oarsmen can keep the boat nearly sta-

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tionary off any point of the Quay indicated, and the selection can be made in sight of the official assemblage of all the Senators and Pontiffs."

"That," said Commodus, "is an excellent suggestion. Have it carried out and see to it that only we four know of it and that no one but the sieve-maker and his assistants have anything to do with conveying the sieves from his shop to the boat and that only the boatmen, the sieve-maker and his assistants are in the boat, that no one else has been in the boat. I'll detail any number of men you ask for to escort the sieve-maker and his convoy.

"I'll have the river policed and all possible traffic suspended. Any craft that are let through the cordons of police-boats will be made to follow the other side of the river. We'll have nothing off the Marble Quay except the boat-load of sieves and the patrol-boats."

He sighed.

"I believe," he said, "that that is all except fixing the day and the hour."

"I suggest," said Lutorius, "the day after to-morrow, the eighteenth day before the Kalends of September, the twenty-third anniversary of Brinnaria's entrance into the order of Vestals, and, I regret to say, the second anniversary of her night expedition to Aricia."

"That suits me," said Commodus.

"And the hour?" Numisia queried.

"Noon," said the Emperor.

Accordingly it was settled that Brinnaria was to face her ordeal at midday on August fifteenth of the nine hundred and thirty-seventh year after the founding of Rome, 184 of our era.

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That night Numisia, conferring with Brinnaria, concluded by saying:

"Truttidius enjoined me to remind you to be very careful not to touch the web of the sieve with your fingers. Also he says that, if anybody's finger touches the web of the sieve as it is being handed to you, you are to decline to accept it and to demand another."

"I understand that already," said Brinnaria.

The Marble Quay was that part of the embankment along the left bank of the Tiber which was used by the Emperors of Rome for embarking on their state barges and for landing from them whenever they took part in one of the gorgeous river processions. Also it was used by all members of the Imperial household for starting on excursions by water or when returning from them. It was situated below the north corner of the Aventine Hill, not far from the square end of the Circus Maximus, close to the round Temple of Hercules and near the meat market. Every trace of it has long since vanished, its precious marbles having offered most tempting plunder for builders of every century since the fall of Rome.

In its glory it was a space about two hundred feet long and nearly a hundred feet wide, bounded by a gentle hollow curve along the river, and enclosed on the other three sides by magnificent colonnaded porticoes. The shafts of the columns were of black Lucullean marble and fully forty feet high. Their capitals and bases were of green porphyry, the entablature they carried of red porphyry and the wall behind them of yellow Numidian marble. The area was paved with slabs of pinkish and light greenish marble while the copings of the Quay and the steps leading down to

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the water were of coral red marble, a building material extremely rare and very costly.

At noon on the fifteenth of August the area, lined all round just before the colonnade by a double rank of Prætorian guards, gorgeous in their trappings of red gloss leather, gilded metal and scarlet cloth, was thronged with Senators, Pontiffs and officials of the Imperial Court, to the number of nearly a thousand. Midway of the crowd, near the head of the middle water-stair, a part of the pavement, ringed about by the lucky dignitaries in the front row of spectators, was left free. In it, by the water-steps, were grouped a selection of Pontiffs, all the Flamens, four Vestals and the Emperor. The yellow river was almost free of craft; along the other bank some barges were being warped up-stream; nearby only patrol boats were visible.

Brinnaria, standing alert and springily erect, her white habit dazzlingly fresh, fresh as the white flowers clasped at her bosom by her big pearl brooch, looked like a care-free young matron who had had a long night's sleep and a good breakfast. Commodus, looking her up and down, mentally contrasted her easy pose and the rosiness of her smiling face with the tense statuesqueness and austere, almost grim countenances of her three colleagues. He noticed that her three-strand pearl necklace seemed to become her more than theirs became the other three and that she wore her square, white headdress with an indefinable difference, that there was a difference in the very hang of her headband and in the way its tassels lay on her bosom. He noted two unusual adjuncts to her attire; a long, rough towel through her girdle and a gold sacrificial dipper thrust in beside it.

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"Are you ready?" he asked her.

She looked him full in the face and slowly raised her left arm, stiffly straight, hand extended, palm down, until her finger-tips were almost level with his face and not a foot from it. Holding it so at full stretch she asked:

"What do you think of that? Am I ready?"

Commodus regarded her finger-tips, her face, and again her finger-tips:

"Hercules be good to me!" he exclaimed. "Not a tremble, not a waver, not a quiver. You are mighty cool. You've plenty of confidence. I take it you are ready."

"I am," said Brinnaria. "Where is that sieve?"

From behind her spoke Calvaster.

"I have a sieve here."

Commodus rounded on him like an angry mastiff.

"Who authorized you to speak?" he demanded. "You act as if you were Emperor. You are merely a minor Pontiff. Remember that and speak when you are spoken to."

Calvaster, abashed but persistent, stammered:

"I merely offered a sieve."

"None of your concern to offer a sieve," Commodus growled. "You insult all of us and me most of all. Do you take me to be so unfair as to subject this lady to her test with a sieve brought and offered by her accuser?"

Calvaster was dumb.

"Show me that sieve," the Emperor commanded.

Calvaster produced from under his robes a copper-hooped sieve strung with linen.

Commodus handed it to Brinnaria.

"What do you think of that sieve?" he inquired.

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Brinnaria held it up to the light and looked through the web; held it level, upside down, and looked along the web.

"It is very irregularly woven," she pronounced; "some of the meshes are three times the size of others. It is very unevenly strung, it bags in two places."

She held it up to her face a moment.

"Also," she concluded, "it has been scrubbed with wood-ashes and fuller's-earth. Vesta herself could not carry water in that sieve."

"Give it back to me!" the Emperor ordered.

He eyed it as she had, sniffed at it like a dog at a rat-hole, and glared over it at Calvaster.

"You advertise yourself to all the world," he snarled, "as an unworthy Pontiff and a contemptible caitiff. You attempt to entrap me into the meanest unfairness! You pose as a public-spirited citizen solicitous about the sanctity of the worship of Vesta and I find you a pettifogging wretch actuated by spite and malice. You desire not a fair test, but the ruin of a woman you are low-minded enough to hate. Eugh!"

With one of his accesses of unconventional energy he flung the sieve far out over the river. It sailed whirling through the air, splashed in the water and sank out of sight.

"For the price of one dried bean, I'd order you thrown after it," said Commodus to Calvaster.

He beckoned one of his aides.

"Signal that boat!" he commanded.

A broad blunt-ended cargo-boat, rather guided than propelled by its four heavy oars, came drifting down with the current. Its gunwale was hung with horse-hair sieves. Up from the thwarts stood many poles, each with cross-pieces, every cross-piece hung with

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sieves. Its oarsmen edged it nearer and nearer to the Quay and slowed its motion until it was almost stationary opposite the stair, scarcely an arm's-length from the lowest step.

When it was close the Emperor spoke to Numisia: "Choose any sieve you see."

Numisia indicated the sieve on the forward arm of the second cross-piece of the fourth pole from the bow.

Lutorius, at the Emperor's bidding, called the directions to Truttidius, who, bowed and bent with age until he looked almost like a clothed ape, wizened so that his leathery, wrinkled face was like a dried apple, was standing near the middle of the boat.

"Go down the steps," said Commodus to Brinnaria, "and yourself take the sieve from him."

Brinnaria, on the lower step, reached over the water and grasped the rim of the sieve which Truttidius held out to her. She held it up to the light. Its web was of black and white horse-hair, each thread alternately of a different color. It was made for bolting the finest flour and the tiny apertures between the hairs were all of a size and scarcely broader than the hairs themselves.

She scrutinized the sieve from several angles and then looked back at the Emperor.

"Are you satisfied with that sieve?" he queried.

"I am satisfied with this sieve," spoke Brinnaria, loud and clear.

"I want to see close," said Commodus, coming down the steps.

Brinnaria, holding the sieve in both hands, lifted it towards the blue sky.

"O Vesta!" she prayed aloud, "O my dear Goddess, manifest your divinity, succor your votary! To

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prove me pleasing and acceptable in your eyes, grant me the miraculous power to carry up these stairs water from this river in the sieve which I hold!"

She lowered her arms and holding the sieve in her left hand knelt on one knee on the lowest step, spread her towel over the other knee and took from her belt the sacrificial dipper. With that she scooped up half a ladleful of Tiber water. On the towel spread over her knee she carefully dried the bottom of the dipper. Holding it just outside the rim of the sieve she glanced up at Commodus.

"Go on," he said.

She smiled.

"If you want to see me fail," she said, "talk to me. If you want to see me carry water in this sieve, let me alone."

"I'm dumb," said he.

She eyed the sieve to make sure that it was level and steady. Commodus, also eyeing it, judged it both steady and level.

She brought the ladle over the rim of the sieve and lowered it until it all but touched the middle of the web.

She tilted the ladle slowly, slowly she poured its contents over its lip.

She lifted it clear:

On the web of the sieve lay a silver disk, as it were, of water, round-edged and shining.

"Hercules be good to me!" cried Commodus.

"Keep quiet!" she admonished him. "You'll put me off."

She dipped up a ladleful of water, flirted half the water out, wiped the bottom of the ladle on her knee and brought it cautiously over the sieve, cautiously she lowered it until it nearly touched the shining disk

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of water, cautiously she tilted it, cautiously she let its contents flow over its lip.

The disk of water spread.

She repeated the process.

The disk of water spread.

Again and again she repeated the process.

The disk of water became a film hiding nearly all the web of the sieve.

Commodus noticed that, as she dipped up each ladleful of water, she watched the dipper out of the corner of her eye, as it were, with a sort of partial, sidelong glance, but that all the while her gaze was intent on the sieve.

He noticed other details of her procedure.

"You never pour twice in the same place," he commented.

Rigid as a statue, the sieve in her hand as unmoving as if clamped in a vise, Brinnaria spoke:

"If I take my eyes off the sieve," she rebuked him, "it will tilt in my hand and the water will run through. If you make me look round you'll destroy me. You are not fair."

"I'm dumb," said Commodus again, apologetically.

As she poured in the next dipper-load, the film of water touched the rim of the sieve at one point.

Commodus heard a sharp intake of Brinnaria's breath.

The next half-ladleful she poured near the spot where the water touched the sieve-rim.

Round near the hoop she dribbled in half-ladleful after half-ladleful until the web of the sieve was entirely covered.

She had moved slowly from the first dip into the

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river. But now, since she could not see any part of the web of the sieve, she moved yet more slowly.

Commodus began to be impatient.

"That is plenty of water," he said.

"Do you, as Pontifex Maximus," she uttered, "certify that the water now in this sieve is as deep as you stipulated?"

"I," said Commodus in a loud voice, "as Emperor and as Pontifex Maximus, here certify before all men that the water now supported by the web of that sieve is enough to demonstrate the favor of Vesta towards you and your impeccable integrity."

"Back away," said Brinnaria, "I'm going to stand up."

She thrust the handle of the ladle through her belt, brushed the towel from her knee and with her right hand also she grasped the sieve. Holding it now in both hands, her eyes on it, she very slowly, inch by inch, rose to her feet. When she was erect, she very slowly drew back her left foot until her two feet were close together.

"Back away," she repeated. "I'm going to turn round."

Slowly she pivoted on her firm feet until she was standing with her back to the river.

Commodus at the top of the steps stared down at her.

"Back away," she reiterated, "I'm coming up the steps."

Up the steps she came, very slowly. Planted on her right foot she would almost imperceptibly raise and advance her left foot. When it was firm on the step, she would gradually shift her weight to that foot, would very deliberately straighten up and very carefully draw

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up her right foot until both feet were together. So standing she would breathe several times before she repeated the process.

When she was standing firm on the top step on the level of the Quay platform, she raised both hands until the sieve was level with her chin.

"You have won," Commodus exclaimed. "You have demonstrated your Goddess' favor. The test is over."

An arm's length away stood Calvaster.

"It's a trick!" he cried. "That is not water."

"Not water!" cried Brinnaria.

All the forgotten tomboy of her childish girlhood surged up within her. The obsolete hoydenishness inside her exploded.

"Not water!" she cried, and smashed the sieve over his head.

The rim on his shoulders, his head protruding from the torn web, frayed ends of broken horse-hair sticking up round his neck, the water trickling down his clothing and dripping from his thin locks, from his big flaring ears, from the end of his long nose, his face rueful and stultified, he presented a sufficiently absurd appearance.

Commodus, like the overgrown boy he was, burst into roars of laughter. The Pontiffs laughed, the Senators laughed, even Manlia and Gargilia laughed.

"It's a trick!" Calvaster repeated.

On the face of Commodus mirth gave place to wrath.

"Isn't that enough water for you?" he roared. "Anybody would think, the way you behave, that I am the minor Pontiff and you the Emperor. I'll teach you!"

He turned and beckoned a centurion of the guard. With his file of men he came on the double quick.

"Seize that man!" the Emperor commanded.

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Two of the Prætorians gripped Calvaster by the elbows.

"March him out there to the edge," came the next order, the Emperor gesturing towards the quay-front on his right.

At the brink of the platform the Prætorians paused.

"Grab him with both your hands," the Emperor commanded, "and pitch him into the river."

Over went Calvaster with a mighty splash.

As all Romans were excellent swimmers he came to the surface almost at once. A few strokes in front of him was the boat with the sieves. To it he swam and Truttidius hauled him aboard and located him on a thwart.

After the general merriment had waned and the laughter had abated Commodus faced the assemblage and raised his hand.

Into the ensuing silence he spoke not as a blundering lad nor as a sportsman, but as a ruler. For the moment, in fact, he looked all the Emperor.

"We have all beheld," he said, "a miracle marvellous and convincing. As Prince of the Republic, as Chief Pontiff of Rome, I proclaim this Priestess cleared of all imputations whatever. Manifestly she is dear to Vesta, and worthy of the favor she has shown her. Henceforward let no man dare to smirch her with any slur or slander."

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CHAPTER XXII

TRIUMPH

IN recognition of Brinnaria's complete and incontrovertible vindication Commodus decreed an unusually sumptuous state banquet at the Palace, inviting to it all the most important personages of the capital, including the more distinguished senators, every magistrate, the higher Pontiffs, the Flamens in a body and most of his personal cronies.

While old-fashioned households, such as that of Vocco and Flexinna, clung to the antique Roman habit of lying down to meals on three rectangular dining-sofas placed on three sides of a square-topped table, this arrangement had long been supplanted at Court by a newer invention. The mere fact that, from of old, it had been looked upon as the worst sort of bad manners to have more than three diners on a sofa, and as scarcely less ridiculous to have fewer than three, had made the custom vexatious in the extreme, as it constrained all entertainers to arrange for nine guests or eighteen or twenty-seven and ruled out any other more convenient intermediate numbers. In the progressive circles of society and at the Palace, the tables were circular, each supported from the center by one standard with three feet, and each table was clasped, as it were, by a single ample C-shaped sofa on which any number of guests from four to twelve could conveniently recline.

At the Palace banquet in honor of Brinnaria, three

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tables only were set on the Imperial dais at the head of the dining hall. On one side of the Emperor's table was that where feasted the higher Flamens and Pontiffs, the sofa of the other was occupied by the young Empress, by the wives of the higher Flamens, and by the four Vestals present.

Brinnaria declared that her appetite was as good as on the day when she had returned home from her exile to Aunt Septima's villa.

After two public advertisements of the Emperor's favor and esteem she was entirely free from any sort of worry. Her enemies were few, merely Calvaster and his parasites, and they were thoroughly cowed and curbed their tongues. Not only no defamation of her but not even an innuendo gained currency in the gossip of the city during the remainder of her term of service. Quite the other way. Her fame as a Vestal whose prayers were sure to be heard, at first a source of natural pride and gratification to her, came to be a burden, even a positive misery. There was an immemorial belief that if a Vestal could be induced to pray for the recapture of an escaped slave, such a runaway, if within the boundaries of Rome, would be overcome by a sort of inward numbness which would make it impossible for him to cross the city limits, so that the retaking of such fugitives became easy, as it was only necessary to search the wards for them. City owners of escaped slaves besieged Brinnaria for years and as it was reported that her intercessions were invariably effective, her fame increased and petitions for her assistance pestered her. She bore the annoyance resignedly, reflecting that, while she was in such repute, no one was likely to impugn her honor.

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Life in the Atrium, for the ensuing six years, altered little. Causidiena, within three years after Brinnaria's ordeal, became totally blind. Care of her devolved particularly upon Terentia, of whom she was dotingly fond. The routine duties of the maintenance of the sacred fire those two shared, for Causidiena, even stone blind, never required any one's assistance to tell her the condition of the Altar-fire and could care for it and feed it even alone, judging its needs by the sensations of her outstretched hands, never burning herself, never letting brands or ashes fall on the Temple floor. But in all other matters Causidiena and Terentia were concerned only when their participation was demanded by canonical regulations, Terentia devoting herself to attendance on Causidiena, while Causidiena officiated only when the presence of the Chief Vestal was indispensable.

For Numisia, Gargilia, Manlia and Brinnaria their main concern was to arrange that Causidiena should have as little as possible to do and that Terentia might devote as much as possible of her time to entertaining Causidiena. This was not easy to accomplish, for Causidiena's mind was perfectly clear, her knowledge of every inch of the Atrium enabled her to move about it unhesitatingly at all hours of the day and night, her sense of duty urged her to do all that she had ever done when her sight was perfect, and, like most blind persons, she resented any reference, expressed or implied, to her infirmity. Consideration for her called for almost superhuman tact and dexterity. To the best of their ability the four strove to shield her without her being able to perceive their sedulity. To the charm of Terentia's music she, moreover, yielded readily. Music, as never before, occupied the leisure of the Atrium.

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During these years Brinnaria was almost entirely happy. Her duties, her solicitude for Causidiena, her affection for Terentia, her delight in her own and Terentia's music filled up most of her time.

Her horse-breeding continued to interest her, but her interest was milder and far from absorbing. She kept it up largely because she regarded her outings as imperatively necessary to maintain her health, while aimless outings bored her.

As when younger, she dined out very often and regularly with Vocco and Flexinna. But since Calvaster's accusation, she never visited Flexinna alone, always in company with another Vestal, usually Terentia, so that her dinners at Flexinna's became restricted to evenings on which she and Terentia were both off duty. Terentia, who was passionately fond of small children, revelled in her visits to Flexinna's house, where there were children of all ages in abundance, all ready to make friends, all diverting, all pleased at being petted, and, as Flexinna said:

"Not a stutterer among 'em."

From Almo news came frequently through Flexinna. His campaign, deliberately prepared and relentlessly carried out, progressed evenly and without any reverse. The nomads nowhere withstood his legions and their attendant cloud of allied cavalry; one after the other their strongholds were reached and stormed, methodically and unhurriedly he reduced tribe after tribe to submission, his prestige growing from season to season and from year to year.

When Brinnaria's term of service was drawing to an end and only about eleven months of it remained, all Roman society was convulsed by what was variously

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referred to as the Calvaster scandal, the great poisoning trial or the murder of Pulfennia.

Pulfennia Ulubrana, one of Calvaster's great-aunts, was a dwarfish creature, humpbacked and clubfooted. She was an only child and her parents, in spite of her deformities, were devoted to her. They lavished on her everything that fondness could suggest, and, as they were very wealthy, she not only lived but enjoyed life in her way and to a very considerable extent.

To begin with she never had an ill hour or an ache or a pain from her earliest years. Then, like many cripples, she had great vitality and a wonderfully alert mind. Amid the small army of maids, governesses, tutors, pages, litter-bearers, and so on, with which her parents surrounded her she did not become merely peevish, exacting and overbearing, as might have been expected. Even the services of her personal physician, of three expert readers to read aloud to her and of a half dozen musicians to divert her whenever she pleased, did not spoil her. She was imperious enough, self-willed and obstinately resolute to have her own way in all matters, but she had a great deal of common-sense, realized what was possible and what impossible and was considerate of her entire retinue, even of such unimportant slave-girls as her three masseuses.

She was greedy of all sorts of knowledge and acquired an education altogether unusual for a Roman woman. Withal she was feminine in her tastes, spent much time on embroidery and was justly proud of her complex and beautiful productions in this womanly art.

She overcame her disabilities to a great extent and, with no lack of conveyances, became a figure almost as well-known in Roman society as Nemestronia herself. As she had an accommodating disposition, an excellent

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appetite and a witty tongue, she was a welcome guest at banquets and went about a great deal. Also she entertained lavishly.

She survived the pestilence and, like so many of the remnants of the nobility, found herself solitary and enormously wealthy.

Her vast estates she managed herself and she knew to a sesterce the value of every piece of property, the justifiable expenses of maintaining each, and the income each should yield. Self-indulgent as she was and moreover an inveterate gambler, she grew richer every year.

Like all childless Romans of independent means she was the object of unblushing and overwhelming attentions from countless legacy cadgers. She enjoyed the game, accepted everything offered in the way of gifts, services or invitations, and, moreover, played up to it, for she was forever destroying her last will and making a new one. Each was read aloud to a concourse of expectant and envious legatees. Each specified scores of legacies of no despicable amount, and yet more numerous sops to numerous acquaintances. In every will Calvaster, her nearest relative and favorite grandnephew, was named as chief legatee.

She kept on making wills, and, what was more, she kept on living. Naturally her wealth, her eccentricities, her amazing healthiness and her obstinate vitality were subjects of general remark by all the gossips of the capital.

One night, an hour or two after midnight, she was seized with violent internal pains, and, in spite of the ministrations of her private physician, died before dawn.

In Rome any sudden death was likely to be attributed to poison. In her case the indications, from the Roman

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point of view, all converged on the inference that she had been poisoned. No one questioned the conclusion.

Calvaster was immediately suspected. The evidence against him would not suffice to put in jeopardy any one in our days. To the Romans it seemed sufficient to justify his incarceration and trial. He had more to gain by the old lady's death than anybody else. He had been chronically in need of money and there had been much friction between him and Pulfennia on this point. She had always provided for his necessities, but had always insisted on scrutinizing every item in his accounts, and on being convinced of his need for every sesterce she gave him. She had supported him, but by an irritating dole of small sums. He had joked with his cronies about her hold on life. He had been heard to say that he would be glad when she was gone. He had bought various drugs from various apothecaries, though none within a year of her death and none used merely as a poison. Under torture some of her slaves and some of his slaves told of his having tried to induce them to put poison in her food.

Roman society promptly divided into two camps on the question of his guilt or innocence. The subject was debated with vehemence, even with acrimony. He had been a disagreeable creature from childhood and had made many enemies. On the other hand, great numbers of fair-minded people asserted that no man, however distasteful to themselves, should be convicted on such flimsy evidence.

His trial was watched with great interest, and when he was convicted and an appeal was successful and a retrial ordered, upper class Rome seethed with altercations. The case, by common consent, was tabooed as a subject of conversation at all social gatherings; feeling

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ran so high that it was possible to mention the matter only between intimate friends.

Naturally Flexinna and Brinnaria, Terentia and Vocco discussed the case frequently. To her friends' amazement Brinnaria maintained that she did not feel convinced of Calvaster's guilt.

"I always despised him and hated him," she said, "and I despise and hate him as much as ever, if not more. He certainly has been my worst enemy and he came very near to ruining me. But I see no reason why hate should blind me in judging his case. I should be glad to have him plainly convicted and put to death. It would please me. But I am not pleased at his present plight. I am not convinced of his guilt. I don't believe any slave evidence given under torture. A tortured slave will say anything he thinks likely to relax his sufferings or please his questioners. And I see no proof of Calvaster's guilt in the other evidence. Everybody buys such drugs as he bought. And suppose he did joke about Pulfennia's tenacity to life, who wouldn't? I don't believe it is proved that she died of poison anyway. People who have never been ill are reckless eaters. Look at me, I am. She may have died of indigestion or stomach-ache or what not. I'd do anything I could to save him, now."

"D-D-Do you mean to say," spoke Flexinna, "that if you encountered him being led out to execution, you'd reprieve him?"

"A Vestal can't use her prerogative of reprieving criminals," said Brinnaria, "unless she encounters by accident a criminal being led to execution. She can't lay in wait for one. Any suspicion of collusion vitiates her privilege. The encounter must be unforeseen."

"Suppose," said Flexinna, "you did meet C-C-Cal-

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vaster on his way to execution, wouldn't you g-g-gloat over him and watch him on his way and not interfere?"

"No, I should not, I should interfere," said Brinnaria, "and anyhow, what is the use of supposing? Suppose the moon fell on your front teeth, would you stop stuttering?"

In June of 191 Almo returned from Syria, completely victorious and much acclaimed. He brought with him his veteran legions and was received with every mark of the Emperor's favor. After his official reception he at once left Rome for Falerii, where he was to remain until the last day of Brinnaria's service.

Meanwhile his house on the Carinæ was opened and put in order under Flexinna's supervision.

On August 14th, Lutorius, Causidiena, Numisia and Brinnaria had a long conference as to the details of her wedding, which was to take place on August 16th. The subject needed not a little discussion, as the circumstances were unusual. Having no parents, nor indeed any near connections, it was inevitable that the wedding should vary a great deal from what was customary.

It was decided that on leaving the Atrium after her exauguration, she should spend one night as the guest of Nemestronia; that on the next day she should go to Vocco's house and be married from there; but that in the ceremonies, Lutorius, who had been her spiritual father for many years, should take the part which her own father would have taken had he been alive. It was also decided that the wedding feast should be at Almo's house, after the wedding-procession, instead of at Vocco's before, as it would have been if she had living parents and was being married from her home.

Lutorius, who had a warm personal affection for

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Brinnaria, had been hovering about her, as it were, for some days, and on this last full day of her service he kept, so to speak, fluttering in and out of the Atrium, repeatedly returning to confer about some trifle or other which he had forgotten.

So it happened that he was approaching the portal as she came out for her afternoon airing.

"You have your light carriage, to-day, I see," he said. "Yesterday you had out your state coach. Why the difference?"

Brinnaria, settling herself among her cushions, leaned out towards him as he stood beside the vehicle, holding on to the tires, his arms stiff, a hand on each wheel.

"This," she said, "is merely a constitutional. Yesterday I took my last outing with all my special privileges as a Vestal, drove all over Rome in my state coach, drove up to the Capitol, and, in a fashion, said farewell to the advantages of my office."

"How do you feel about it all?" he asked.

Brinnaria pulled a wry face and laughed a forced laugh.

"I am finding out," she said, "why so few Vestals ever leave the order. When I realize that, after to-day, I shall have no lictor to clear the streets for me, that I may go out in my litter daily, but even so without a runner ahead, that I may never again drive through Rome, that I have been driven up to the Capitol for the last time and may go there hereafter only afoot or in my litter, I am almost ready to change my mind, give up freedom and matrimony and Almo and all and cling to my privileges. When it comes over me that, as I go out to-day, the lictors of any magistrate will salute me, even the lictors of the Emperor, whereas after to-morrow noon there will be no salutes for me, I under-

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stand why most Vestals live out their lives in the order."

"There is time still to change your mind and stay with us," he said, smiling.

Brinnaria laughed a perfectly natural laugh.

"No danger," she said; "my heart is Almo's as always."

"And now, if you have nothing urgent to discuss, I'm off."

"Where to?" asked Lutorius.

"I don't care," said Brinnaria, "I don't even want to know. Give the coachman any orders that come into your head, sketch a round-about drive for me. I'm in the humor to have nothing on my mind."

Lutorius, with a comprehending smile, whispered to the coachman, who mounted his tiny seat.

Almost at once Brinnaria was lost in thought and jolted through the streets oblivious to her surroundings, not even seeing what was before her eyes.

From her muse she was roused by the halting of the carriage.

Amazed she looked up.

Still more amazed, she recognized, standing near the head of the off-horse, the state-executioner.

This repulsive public-character, tolerated but despised and loathed, was the last living creature in or about Rome who would dare to approach a Vestal.

At sight of him she was inundated with a hot flood of wrath. She was about to call to her lictor, to demand why the carriage had stopped and rebuke him for being so negligent as to allow so unsavory a being to come so near her.

Then she saw between her and the executioner, just in front of that official, a kneeling figure.

She recognized Calvaster.

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Also she saw the guards and executioner's assistants grouped about the two.

It came over her that she had encountered, wholly by accident, this gloomy convoy, and that before her, beseeching her for a reprieve, begging for a mere day and night more of life, knelt her inveterate, furtive enemy.

She raised her hand and looked the executioner full in the eyes.

"Send him back," she commanded. "He is reprieved until this hour to-morrow."

The guards dragged off Calvaster, babbling his pitiful gratitude.

"Drive home!" said Brinnaria to her coachman.

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CHAPTER XXIII

SALVAGE

THE exauguration of a Vestal, by which canonical ritual she was formally released from her obligations of chastity and service and became free to go where she liked and to marry or to remain unmarried as she preferred, was a brief and simple ceremony. But it required the presence of all the Vestals, of the major Flamens, of many Pontiffs, of the entire College of Augurs and of the Emperor himself as Pontifex Maximus.

Commodus, who was impatient of anything which curtailed the time he might lavish on athletic amusements, arrived precisely at noon, at the very last minute. The moment he had entered the Atrium he hurried the ceremony. It was soon over and Brinnaria no longer a Vestal, but a free woman.

It had been arranged that immediately after her exauguration her successor should be taken as a Vestal there in the Atrium by Commodus himself as Chief Pontiff. Little difficulty had been encountered as to selecting a candidate, since a most suitable child had been offered by her parents, people of excellent family and of unblemished reputation. Her name was Campia Severina, and she was a small girl, just seven years old, plump, with a round full-moon of a face, a leaden, pasty complexion, and a most un-Roman nose, flat, broad and snub.

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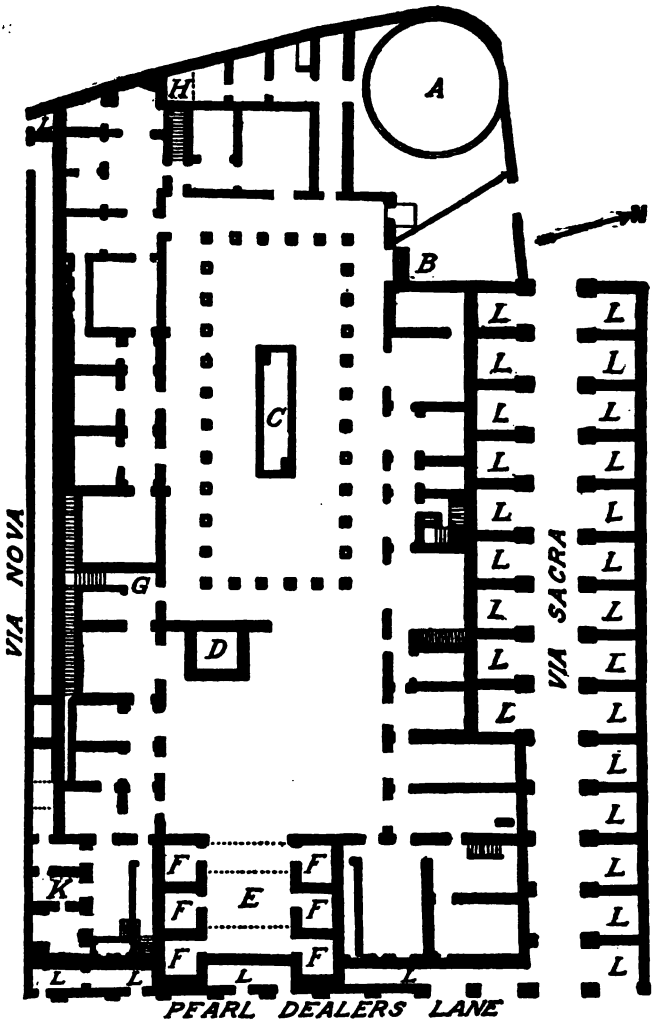

PLAN OF THE GROUND FLOOR OF THE HOUSE OF THE VESTALS

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FIRST FLOOR PLAN OF
THE HOUSE OF THE VESTALS (ATRIUM VESTAE)
at Rome, as it was at the time when Brinnaria inhabited it.

A. The Temple of Vesta.

B. The only outer Door.

C. Tank in Courtyard.

D. The Strong Room.

E. The Reception Room.

F. F. F. The Private Offices of the Vestals.

G. The Principal Staircase.

H. The Treasure Room.

K. The Room under that from which Brinnaria was Saved.

L. L. L. Shops, totally unconnected with the Atrium.

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Commodus, prompted by Lutorius, droned through the required questions and showed manifest relief when he pronounced the word "Beloved" and the second ceremony was over.

He was, however, not wholly a loutish and unmannerly Emperor, but could be tactful and gracious when his interest was aroused. He took time to speak to each of the Vestals; complimented Terentia on her music and spoke of the Empress' admiration of her organ-playing, had a brief but kindly commendation for Manlia and Gargilia; praised Numisia highly for her efficient discharge of the duties devolving on her, and condoled with Causidiena on her blindness and feebleness, wording what he said so dexterously that she could not but feel cheered and comforted.

Then, aside from the assemblage of Pontiffs, Augurs, Flamens and the rest, he spoke privately with Brinnaria:

"I'm sorry to lose you," he said; "I felt comfortable about the Palladium as long as you were a Vestal. Numisia is a woman to be relied on too, and Gargilia and Manlia are capable creatures, but not one of the three is your equal in any respect and they are but three; the others are a corpse, a doll and an infant.

"Understand I'm not growling at your departure, I am trying to convey to you how highly I esteem you. I'll advertise it to all the world by having you and your husband, the moment you are married, put on the official roster of my personal friends who have the right of access to me at all times and can go in and out of the Palace at their pleasure.

"As to your wedding, I'm sorry I gave you my promise to stay away from it. I think that this recent notion of yours that the marriage of an ex-Vestal is an ill-

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omened occasion, like a funeral, is morbid and baseless. Every Vestal has a right to leave the order at the end of her term of service and to marry if she pleases. The right is indubitable. Nothing that is right is ill-omened. I think that an ex-Vestal's wedding ought to be regarded precisely as the wedding of anybody else. The most I'll concede is, that it might be likened to the wedding of a widow, considering her service as a sort of first marriage. That is my judgment, not merely as a man but as Chief Pontiff.

"My impulse is to revoke my pledge and to do all I can to make your wedding a grand affair. But I'm too good a betting man to break a promise. Besides, though I impugn your arguments as an ex-Vestal, I respect your personal preference for a quiet wedding. I'll not insist on being invited to the banquet, and, so far from taking part in the procession, I'll not even peep at it down a side street. I'll keep inside the Palace.

"But I want you to release me from my promise in one small detail. I want to be present at Vocco's to see you two break and eat the old-fashioned cake, and I want to be first to sign your marriage register. I promise to leave as soon as I have signed the register."

Brinnaria, of course, could not but acquiesce.

"Good for you!" said the Emperor, "and thank you too. I'll keep away from the procession, but that won't make any difference in the throngs you'll find along your route. They'll jam the streets and you'll have to plough your way through. No Emperor could ever call out more sight-seers than will the wedding of Brinnaria the water-carrier."

He then went out into the street which his escort blocked, and departed, accompanied by his coterie of

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boxers, wrestlers, swordsmen, jockeys and such-like, convoyed by a large and gorgeous retinue of pages, runners, guards and lictors.

Immediately after his departure Brinnaria said her farewells and set out for Nemestronia's.

Next morning, as she descended from her litter at Vocco's door, a Vestal's carriage drove up and Gargilia got out.

"You're surprised to see me at this hour," she said, "and I don't wonder."

When they were indoors and seated with Flexinna she explained:

"We have been having a terrible night at the Atrium and the worst sort of luck this morning. That little fool of a Campia is the most complete cry-baby and the most homesick little wretch I ever saw or heard of. She has sobbed herself ill and screamed us all out of a night's sleep. Terentia and Manlia were up half the night with her and she waked me and Causidiena.

"The result is that Causidiena has had one of her semi-fainting spells and is in her arm-chair for the day, poor Manlia has one of her splitting headaches and Terentia is almost as bad. I never saw the Atrium in such a state. Campia goes to sleep off and on from exhaustion, but she wakes up howling and keeps blubbering and whining and sniveling. I left both Terentia and Manlia in tears. They are so vexed to think that to-morrow they will be entirely well, but for to-day there is absolutely nothing for it but they must both keep abed and in the dark.

"Numisia sent me to tell you that she will be at your wedding, will walk in the procession and will be at the banquet, but that I must be on duty in the Temple. So we'll just have to have our chat now and

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when I leave we shall not see each other again for the present."

As she climbed into her carriage she said:

"I'm sorry you haven't a bright wedding day."

"So am I," said Brinnaria, glancing up at the gray canopy of rainless cloud which hid the sky; "any day is a good day to be married on, but I hoped for sunshine."

Commodus, faithful to the spirit of his promise, came to Vocco's house with the smallest possible official retinue. He was in the best humor, affable and genial, and cast no chill of formality over the ceremony. He was the first to set his signature to the marriage register, signing in his sprawling school-boy hand. Then he stood aside and looked on while Flexinna, as matron of honor, led Brinnaria to Almo and joined their right hands, while they seated themselves side by side on the traditional cushioned stools, while the Flamen of Jupiter offered on the house-altar the old-fashioned contract-cake, and said the formal prayers for the happiness of the bride and groom; while the Flamen's assistant, one of Flexinna's older boys, carried the cake to Almo and Brinnaria and each broke off a piece and ate it, she uttering the old-time formula:

"Where you are Caius I am Caia."

Above the voices of the guests Commodus' could be distinguished shouting with them:

"Good luck! Good luck!"

In the silence that followed he warned:

"Now, no rising, no bowing. I'm not here to spoil this wedding, I came to enjoy it. No bowing, I tell you, no rising. Let me get out like an ordinary man."

Into the gathering dusk he vanished with his retinue.

As soon as he was gone the arrangement for the

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procession began, the slaves lit their torches and grouped themselves outside the house-door, the flute players struck up a tune, Flexinna's thirteen-year-old boy lit his white-thorn torch at the altar-fire, her eleven-year-old and nine-year-old, as pages of honor, caught Brinnaria by the hands and led her out at the door. So led by the two little boys, their brother with the white-thorn torch walking before her, she passed through the streets to Almo's house, Nemestronia and Flexinna on either side of Almo, close behind her, Vocco and the other guests following.

The people made good the Emperor's prophecy. From house-door to house-door the streets were packed with crowds eager to see her pass and loud to acclaim her. Through cheers, good wishes, loud jokes, merry songs and cries of "Talassio! Talassio!" she passed along the upper part of the Fagutal, and past the flank of the Baths of Titus to the Carinæ.

Her bridal dress of pearl-gray, with the flame-colored bridal veil, reminded her more than a little of that costume of Flexinna's which she had worn to Aricia and back, only that was mostly pink, this mostly gray.

She looked well in it and wore the six braids and the headband more naturally than most brides, having been habituated to them for thirty years, since all Vestals always wore the bridal coiffure.

At the doorway of Almo's house, the bearer of the white-thorn torch halted and faced about inside the door, his two little brothers let go her hands, Almo himself caught her up clear of the pavement and swung her clear of the door-sill. As he held her in the air, nestling to him, she repeated the formula:

"Where you are Caius, I am Caia."

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When he set her down inside the house she was at last a married woman.

She turned and watched the scramble for the white-thorn torch which its bearer first put out and then threw among the crowd after the slaves had also put out their torches.

So watching, Almo's arm about her, she became aware of a strange something in the look of the crowd and of the street.

"What makes it so light?" she asked Almo. "Why are the tops of their heads all bright that way?"

Lutorius, who was near them, explained:

"There is a big fire somewhere the other side of the Capitol. I noticed it at the top of the street. The Capitol stood out black, the outline of both temples plain as in the daylight, against the red smoke behind it."

"Send some of the slaves," said Brinnaria, "to find out where the fire is, and let us lie down to dinner. I'm as hungry as a wolf."

And like a true Roman she began with a trifle of three hard-boiled eggs, merely to take the edge off her appetite.

There were six tables set in Almo's dining-room and an ample crescent-shaped sofa to each. The sixty guests made the big room buzz with talk and echo with laughter.

Nemestronia called across to Brinnaria:

"Now you have what you've always wanted. You're a married woman at last."

"And I'll soon have what I've wanted almost as much," Brinnaria replied.

"What's that?" several voices called.

"Two desires," Brinnaria explained, "haunted me

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all the while I was a Vestal. One was the longing for a horseback ride. I used to revel in galloping bareback. I haven't been astraddle of a horse for thirty years. It won't be many days now before I shall enjoy a good canter on a good horse.

"Then, by to-morrow night, I trust, I shall have had a fine long swim with my husband and six hundred other couples in the big basin of one of the City Baths. Words could not tell you how I have longed to go swimming in the public baths with the rest of my kind, as a lady should."

The messengers returned with the news that the fire had started near the round end of the Flaminian Circus, close to the Temple of Bellona. Before a strong wind it had spread both ways, had caught everything in the north slope of the Capitol between it and Trajan's Forum, the silver-smiths' shops were all ablaze; to the south it had crept between the slope of the Capitol and the theatre of Marcellus and was sweeping over the booths of the Vegetable Market.

"It is the biggest fire in our time," said Lutorius.

"Where will it stop?" queried Numisia.

Both sent their lictors to make further report.

Before the dinner was half over they returned, with messengers from the Atrium. The conflagration was roaring up the Vicus Jugarius and Gargilia was alarmed.

Lutorius and Numisia hastily excused themselves, called for their shoes and went off; he in his litter and she in her carriage.

As Brinnaria was about to cut the wedding cake her former lictor, Barbo, thrust himself into the dining-hall, frantic with concern, and narrated how the

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fire was beyond any hope of control and was already devouring the Basilica Argentaria and Basilica Julia.

"Lutorius has had the sacred fire carried out of the Temple in a copper pan by Gargilia and Manlia," he said, "and Terentia and Numisia, with little Campia, were helping Causidiena along the Holy Street. Causidiena had an earthenware casket in her arms. I saw them turn the corner to their right into Pearl-Dealers Lane. They are safe in the Palace by now."

"Safe in the Palace?" Brinnaria echoed.

"Yes," Barbo repeated. "Safe in the Palace. They say that the Temple and the Atrium must burn, nothing can save them."

"The Temple!" cried Brinnaria. "Fire! And everybody ill except Gargilia and Numisia! And all they could think of would be saving that dear old blind saint and that contemptible cry-baby. Ten to one they have missed the Palladium and taken one of the dummies by mistake!

"O, Almo, I must go save the Palladium!"

Of course Almo protested.

"Don't hinder me," she begged. "Go I must, whether you object or not. We'd never forgive ourselves if to-morrow we learned too late that the Vestals missed the true Palladium in the confusion, whereas I might have saved it if I had tried. They may have taken the real Palladium, I may be too late now to save it if they made a mistake, but I am bound to try."

He shut his lips, but she read his eyes.

"That is like my hero," she said. "Patriotism first, self last."

"Barbo," she called, "run before me and clear the way as if I were still a Vestal. It's illegal, but it will work."

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She started for the house-door and then paused.

"Have you any fire buckets?" she asked Almo. "Then have two of the slaves each fill a bucket and keep close behind us."

Amid the prayers and blessings of the wedding-guests, they went out hand in hand, the two slaves with leather water-buckets behind them, Barbo ahead, bellowing:

"Room for Brinnaria Epulonia! Room for Brinnaria Epulonia!"

At the street corner, before they started down the slope of the Carinæ, they had before them a wide view over the city directly towards the Capitol. Between them and the Capitol Hill they could see the buildings about the Great Forum all one sea of flames.

"The Basilica Æmilia is on fire," said Brinnaria, "and the Temple of Augustus is just catching. We shall be in time; our Temple won't catch before we get there.

"Run, let's run."

Run they did, the crowds making way at Barbo's loud adjurations. In their wedding finery, she with her veil wrapped round her head like a market-woman's shawl, they ran, hand in hand between the great Temple of Venus and Rome, black on their right hand against the reddened clouds, and the vast Colosseum on their left, all orange in the glare, the gilding on its awning-poles glimmering.

Up the Sacred Street they passed, running when they could, ploughing through the crowds when the crowd was too thick.

By the time they passed through the Arch of Titus they were running, panting and gasping, through a

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hail of warm ashes, hot cinders, glowing embers, blazing bits of wood, flaming brands.

At the corner of the Pearl-Dealers Exchange Almo halted, detaining her by her gripped left hand.

"It is no use," he said; "we are too late. You might pass the portal of the Atrium alive, but you'd never get back alive. And I doubt if you could reach the portal through this heat. You'd scorch to death."

"I shall reach the portal," Brinnaria declared, firmly. "But I'm not coming back through it. Listen to me and don't forget. I'm going to make a dash for the portal. I can reach it, our Temple has not caught yet, the bronze-tile roof will hold the fire off the beams some time. This end of the Temple of Augustus has not blazed yet; I can see the cornice.

"Once inside the Atrium I'll not try to come back this way, I'll find the Palladium or make sure it is not there; then I'll run upstairs to the south-east corner. Those rooms are on a level with the pavement of the New Street."

"But," Almo interrupted, "there isn't an opening towards the New Street. The outer wall of the Atrium towards the Palace is all blank wall to the cornice, not even a ventilation hole anywhere."

"I know," she rebuked him; "keep still and listen. I'll run into the third room from the corner. All that end of the Atrium is of brick and cement, not a beam anywhere and the ceilings are vaulted; the fire will be a long time reaching me there. You go up Pearl-Dealers' Lane to the corner of the New Street. From the corner measure thirty-eight feet along the New Street. At that point have a hole smashed through the wall. There are hordes of firemen about with their axes, sledge-hammers and pick-axes. They'll hack a

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hole through for you in no time. The wall is thin there; we had a temporary door made there three years ago for the plumbers when they were putting in the new bath-rooms.

"Now, every moment is precious. Hold my hand and help me to make my dash for the portal, but drop my hand and turn back at the portal; no man may enter the Atrium, except a Pontiff or a workman. When I squeeze your fingers, drop my hand and make your dash back.

"Don't try to check me, husband; self last and patriotism first, for every Roman of us all. We have waited thirty years for each other and we've hardly had time for three kisses yet. But if we must lose each other to save Rome, then we must.

"If I fail, good-bye!"

Then she turned and called the trembling slaves to come nearer.

She ordered:

"Dash that water over us, one over him, one over me. Don't waste any, pour it on our heads. Now go where you please!"

Dripping, hand in hand, they ran over the cinder-strewn pavement, under the rain of blazing fragments, up the Sacred Street, between the furnace-hot walls.

Under the long arcade they were safe.

At its further end she had to face a dash of some ten yards through the blazing brands, the very air seeming on fire.

"I'm afraid!" she cried. "Be brave, Almo, and give me courage!"

Her fingers pressed his, their hands parted.

Her hands over her face she dashed forward.

He saw her vanish through the portal.

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He ran back.

Inside the Atrium Brinnaria turned to her right, passed through a small door, traversed four dark rooms and groped, kneeling on the floor.

Her fingers found five earthenware caskets in a row. Swiftly she felt them.

The third she opened.

Carefully she fingered the statuette inside, running the tips of her finger-ends along the carved folds of the gown, over the helmet, over the fingers clasping the spear.

With the statuette in her hands she stood up. Tearing off her veil she wrapped the statuette in it.

Back she went to the peristyle, and ran round it to her right. Under the roof of the colonnade she was safe from the rain of brands, but even in there the heat was appalling. She felt as if the very marble columns must crumble beside her as she ran.

At the far corner of the courtyard she dashed through a door and ran up two flights of stairs; a short flight in front of her, and a longer flight to her left from the landing of the first. At the top of the stairs she passed through four rooms. In the fifth, lighted from behind her through a door by an orange glow from the glare of the conflagration, she sank down on the floor against its farther wall.

Almost at once she was on her feet, recoiling from the wall. It quivered with the shock of blows from the outside.

A shower of plaster and bits of brick stung her face and spattered all over her.

She saw the point of a pick-axe shine an instant in the fire-glare.

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"I'm here," she called. "I'm safe. Take your time. It's not hot in here yet."

The excited blows thudded on the wall. The sledges broke a hole as big as her head, four times as big as her head.

"Take your time!" she repeated. "There is no hurry now."

Soon she could see the torches outside, the faces of the firemen, Almo's face.

"No!" she said, "I won't be dragged through a crevice. There is plenty of time. Dig that hole bigger!"

When it was large enough to suit her she bade her rescuers back away.

"No man must touch what I carry," she warned.

Outside, in Almo's arms, she was hurried through winding alleys, up narrow stone stairways, to the Palace.

At the end of a deep, dark passageway between high walls Lutorius, with some of the Emperor's aides, was waiting for them at a small door. He guided them to where they were eagerly expected.

As they threaded the corridors, they heard, at first far off, then closer and closer, the sound of a child wailing, bawling, blubbering. Even in the Palace, Campia was an irrepressible cry-baby.

In the chapel of the Statue of Victory they found the Vestals, the Empress and the Emperor.

"I've got it safe," Brinnaria proclaimed.

"I'm a frightful-looking bride," she added, "wet as a drowned rat, scorched all over, all my hair burnt off; I must look a guy."

"Never mind that," said Commodus; "you can't get home to-night, the conflagration is still spreading. I

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doubt if the firemen can save the Colosseum. It would take you till daylight to work your way round the districts which are in confusion. You'll sleep here. I've had Trajan's own private suite made ready for you two, as soon as the first messenger told me of your gallantry. You'll find an army of maids and such waiting for you. Go make yourselves comfortable. The bedroom of Rome's greatest Emperor is none too good for you. Nothing is too good for you, Brinnaria. You've saved the Palladium, and me, and the Empire and the Republic and Rome."

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